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"I BELIEVE in the large simplicities, in the human urges at the back of all of us. I believe in love, courage and compassion. I suppose that is why the people who are out first after cleverness fail to see that life is a complex of the great simplicities. We are apt to look at little bits of the pattern, and not at the whole garment."



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*TWO BLACK
SHEEP*



WARWICK DEEPING

*TWO BLACK
SHEEP*



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
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*TWO BLACK
SHEEP*



TWO BLACK SHEEP



THE green door opened.

"Mr. Belgrave in?"

Yes, Mr. Belgrave was in, and as the green door closed on Captain Vane and the little black-frocked servant, a slant of light was cut and effaced by an edge of shadow. Vane walked along the passage; he remembered noticing that the strip of carpet was red. It led him to that other door, and as he opened it he saw the head and shoulders of a man, and a french window, the autumn foliage of a tree and vivid grass. A flicker of leaves sifted down through an oblique blaze of sunlight. The long window seemed to frame all the brilliant colour and movement of an autumn day, the glowing tree, a scarlet creeper on a wall, grass, and high up a white cloud and a wedge of bright blue sky.

Belgrave was sitting at his desk with his face to the window, and as he rose, his head and shoulders obscured the green oblong of the grass.

"Afternoon, Belgrave. I've just come to settle things."

He saw the other man's face trying to cover the shock of the occasion with a little, flaccid smile.

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"What—Vane! I didn't know you were on leave."

"No—I suppose not."

It happened so quickly and so quietly, and not as Vane had expected it would happen. The sudden tremor in the other man's face, an open mouth, a chair pushed over.

"Vane—wait. I—"

The green strip of grass became visible as Belgrave slid sideways along the desk, while behind him the falling leaves caught the sunlight. A dragging hand upset a pile of books and sent them to the floor. For a moment Vane stood and looked at him lying there. How quiet everything was. He slipped the pistol back into a side pocket of his tunic, turned, opened the door, and walking down the passage, found himself again in the sunlit street. He saw a row of plane trees turning yellow, a pile of cloud glowing like a bosom, and not twenty yards away a dark blue figure marching deliberately along the pavement.

Vane went to meet the man in blue. He was conscious of no qualms, neither of fear nor of anger nor of pity. He was aware of the polished toes of the policeman's boots. They seemed to tread so silently.

"Officer, I've shot a man in there."

The blue eyes stared.

"Shot a man, sir?"

"Yes, in No. 11. The house with a green door. Oh, yes, he's dead—all right. I made no mistake. I suppose I had better come along with you."

CHAPTER ONE



THE new world was still so very new to him, and as he turned from the Strand into the shadow of the Temple gateway, he paused for a moment like a man taking shelter. He would have said that the very sunlight was shattered by the City's sounds, and that the tumult and the traffic of the streets confused him. He put up a hand and eased his hat.

But even in this gateway he was an obstruction, a creature who had stopped to stare, and perhaps to think. He did not belong; he was in the way, and when two men walking abreast jostled past him, he turned and followed them like some floating object that had been held up by a clump of weeds, and, becoming detached, drifted down stream.

Another archway offered itself, and passing through it he found himself in Pump Court. It was empty and silent on this October morning, and with an air of relief he drew aside into a corner of the court, and stood and stared. Again a hand went up and eased his hat. He looked about him. He saw the flagstones and three green lamp-posts, and the grey steps going up to the putty-coloured

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Georgian doorways. The old, soot-blackened brick walls were in the shadow, and so were the trunks of two plane trees that pushed their foliage up into the light. The leaves of the trees were turning yellow, and an occasional leaf came planing down to lie gently upon the flagstones. The only sound to be heard was the clicking of typewriters.

His eyes followed the ascending trunk of one of the plane trees. The canopy of autumn leaves caught the October sunlight, and something in him winced. Fifteen years! Fifteen springs and autumns, the birth and the fall of the leaf! And they said that time was relative. A moment later he had discovered the sundial high up on the wall, and, though it was partly hidden by ivy, he tried to read the inscription on it. It spoke of shadows and departure. Shadows. He walked on across the court under the pale foliage of the plane trees.

The typewriters chattered.

II

Mr. Stuart Blagden rang his bell.

The firm of Blagden & Stephens had their offices in King's Bench Walk, and the names—painted in white letters—had to be searched for among other names on the jamb of a doorway. Down below, two basement windows suggested the law. They had a dustiness. They gave to any loiterer glimpses of an impressive disorder, of ancient things docketed and discarded, old law-books and documents lying upon window-sills and tables, the black bulk of a deed-box, a couple of quill pens, a coat pendent from the knob of a shutter.

An elderly clerk answered the bell.

"Oh, Soames, when Mr. Vane comes, show him straight in."

"Yes, sir."

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Mr. Stuart Blagden sat down at his desk. It had been his father's desk, but old Blagden was dead. It was one of those flat-topped desks, the leather black and scarred, and, being placed at right-angles to the window and slightly to one side, it gave Mr. Blagden a view of the gravelled space and the plane trees, and the cars parked in rows. He could see a black steeple topped by a gold-winged horse, but young Blagden was not looking out of the window. He had picked up a letter and was reading it.

"Thanks. I think I would prefer to make my exit alone. I shall be grateful if you will get my tailor to send me a couple of new suits."

There were other details in the letter, but Mr. Blagden had read it before and had kept it on his desk under a letter-weight. The thing was a curious human document, restrained, formal and quite without emotion, and Stuart Blagden returned it to its place on the desk. He sat and looked out of the window. He was a tall, fair, placid man going bald; he had to put on pince-nez when he read; his blue eyes were collecting wrinkles.

But his consciousness was collecting the lights and shadows of that other life. Fifteen years, and the man had been his friend. The strange and fierce deliberation of that act, but then Vane had been one of those men who had flared in the face of anything that was mean and ugly.

Meanwhile—? The fingers of Blagden's right hand tapped gently on the black leather of the desk as though his fingers were rapping out a string of realities, transmitting a code and setting it down in brief, blunt sentences. There had been occasions when he had visited prisons. He had visited Vane in prison.

He thought of penal punishment, the stark routine, the silence, the repression. The unlocking of cell doors at five-thirty on winter

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mornings, the slop-parade, breakfast—bread and margarine and porridge, chapel, a voice crying in the cage. Again—the cells, and a little meditation. Then—parade, roll-call and rub-down, work in the shops or upon the farm, parade, rub-down, cells.

Dinner. The clatter of the dinner tins being collected.

Parade, roll-call, rub-down, work, parade, cells.

Supper.

Eight p.m. and lights out. Hours of darkness and of isolation.

The rhythm of it rang in Blagden's head like some piece of doggerel. Eena—deena, dina, do. Cells, parade, roll-call, rub-down, work, parade, roll-call, rub-down, cells. He had watched the mechanism at work, all those little clockwork figures emerging from niches, standing in ranks, marching off, and every day the routine was the same, save that on Sundays there was more official religion and exercise parades instead of work, and the blue-collar men were allowed to walk in couples and talk for half an hour. Of course there were certain ameliorations—lectures, addresses, a library, the visits of the chaplain, occasional letters, and the infirmary if you fell sick, but an ex-convict had described these favours as a few split peas chucked into an ocean of skilly.

Stuart Blagden's fingers remained still. He was wondering how fifteen years of such an existence would have affected a fastidious and temperamental creature like Vane. Stuart Blagden had interested himself in the psychology of prison life. He knew that the successful prisoner was he who surrendered, who became a mechanism, instantly obedient to the voice of authority. It was fatal to fight. Merely physical man, cut off from adventure, the red meat of life, women, might escape into apathy, or into a kind of dreadful weak-mindedness, but what escape was there for a man with a mind? Was it possible to evolve a philosophy in prison?

He looked out of the window. He saw a man standing by the

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iron railings. A blue pigeon came fluttering to settle on the pavement close to him, but the man did not notice the bird. He was looking at the basement windows with their suggestion of old, forgotten things tied up in red tape. Vane.

The door opened, and the grey head of the elderly clerk appeared.

"Excuse me, sir, but if Mr. Vane calls shall I bring in that statement of accounts?"

Mr. Blagden held up a hand as though he was watching the movements of some animal and he did not want the creature disturbed. He spoke softly.

"Yes, Soames, let me have all the necessary papers."

He saw Henry Vane's left hand feel in the inner breast pocket of his coat. He brought out an old leather wallet, opened it, hesitated, and then slipped the wallet back into his pocket. The blue pigeon was strutting close to Vane's feet, and the sunlight made little burrs of light on the heels of Vane's very new shoes.

III

Mr. Blagden took off his pince-nez, pushed back his chair, and rose.

He was surprised by the quietness with which the man had come into the room. The figure was there where nothing had been before, just as though it had passed through the wall. It stood and waited, and Stuart Blagden, after one glance at Vane's face, felt strangely moved.

His hand went out.

"Hallo, old man."

And Vane hesitated. His eyelids flickered. He was like a muffled presence in the room. He seemed so unsure.

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"Afraid I'm a few minutes late."

Blagden noticed the limpness of the hand. It had lost its grip. Well, naturally. He felt himself responsible for the other man's acute self-consciousness. Some situations need a smooth and delicate touch.

"Sit down, old man."

Vane sat down in the chair on the other side of the desk, and his very movements had a deliberate docility as though the physical part of him had become accustomed to waiting upon an order. He nursed his new hat on his knees, and his eyes fixed themselves on Blagden's inkstand. He was being looked at, observed, and though the eyes were friendly his face seemed too sensitive for such scrutiny. Blagden moved to his own chair. He had seen life—or a fragment of life—as a man sees it at times in an intuitive and comprehending flash. That still, tense face with its grizzled temples and the bitter sensitiveness of its eyes. He was conscious of profound compassion.

Blagden sat down, and he seemed to sit down carefully as though some very fragile surface had to be considered. He was conscious of the silence, and he felt that it was his business to break it without making the affair like a shattering of glass. He opened a drawer, extracted a box of cigarettes and pushed them across the desk to Vane.

"Smoke?"

Vane looked at him. It was a strange, dark glance, like that of a man peering from behind a curtain. His hand reached out towards the box, and holding a cigarette between finger and thumb, he seemed to reflect upon it.

"First time for fifteen years."

"Is it? I should have thought— Old habits."

Blagden frowned at himself and struck a match, and as he held

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it across the desk, the tiny flame lit two other little flames in the circles of Vane's eyes.

"Thanks."

"Well, how do you find things?"

Vane's glance grew vague. He was watching the smoke.

"I notice the noise. In the streets, I mean. A prison's a rather quiet place, you know."

Again the silence threatened to settle. Vane was smoking as though doing it for the first time in his life; also, he had the air of trying to say something and the words would not come, for the inward and secret self had been silent for so many years. He had moved his lips and tongue and satisfied the conventions of prison life, but the inner man had been mute. He had conversed with himself in the cell of his own cloistered consciousness, and now he found himself like a shy man thrust suddenly upon a platform to address a strange and staring crowd.

His lips moved.

"One gets rusted up—you know. I suppose—we ought to talk business."

Blagden nodded and lit himself a cigarette. He had ceased from looking too closely at Vane's face, for it was too sensitive to be stared at.

"Oh, a few details. It's all quite simple. Your mother's estate?"

He saw Vane's eyelids flicker.

"Funny to think she's dead. Oh, yes—I've had these things living with me in my cell for years, Blaggy. One can't say much. Not much to be said. I've had my medicine."

The door opened and Soames, the clerk, came in with a sheaf of papers. He placed them on Mr. Blagden's desk, waited self-effacingly and silently for one discreet moment, and realizing that his chief was in no mood to require him, he backed to the door.

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But before closing the door he looked curiously at Vane, for the humanist in Mr. Soames was not so dusty a document. He remembered well the case of Henry Vane, a man who had come back from the trenches and shot his wife's lover. Yes, it had been a sensational case. It had provoked public opinion. There had been people who had declared that Vane should have been acquitted, or have been given a nominal sentence, instead of twenty years! And there he was sitting in that chair, the same and yet different, and as Soames closed the door he was saying to himself that it might be like the case of a dead man resurrected.

Blagden was unfolding a sheet of foolscap. He admonished his own compassion. Yes, you couldn't expect a man like Vane to indulge in a confessional. Some things were best left covered. He was repeating Vane's words: "I've had my medicine."

He became the lawyer, deliberate and almost fatherly. He had a pleasant-speaking voice, and Mr. Soames stood in the passage for a moment and listened to it. He stroked his longish nose with a finger that had a little inkstain on it.

"How old was the fellow then? Let me see, thirty-one or so. That makes him forty-six. But I suppose he must be older inside. Fifteen years. I've heard it said that some of them come out like living corpses. Extraordinary!"

Blagden was speaking.

"You will have quite a comfortable income, Harry. The estate has appreciated in value since your mother's death. Luckily, when rubber and some of the industrial concerns were at boom prices we got out, and put the money into gilt-edged stock. With your own estate and your mother's you will have about two thousand a year."

"As much as that?"

"Yes, even after the income-tax has been accounted for. The

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capital value works out roughly at fifty thousand pounds."

Vane seemed unable to find a resting-place for the stump of his cigarette.

"You must have looked after things very thoroughly. I'm grateful."

"My dear chap, of course—naturally. I'm a little more than a lawyer. Just glance through this statement of accounts. You will see certain sums charged against you. Shove the cigarette end in this pot."

Vane put out a hand and took the paper, and Blagden noticed the texture of the skin. It was roughened on the inner side of the thumb and on the outer side of the first finger, and Blagden remembered that Vane had worked on the prison farm. He sat back in his chair, and lit another cigarette, and stole a glance at Vane's face. It seemed to him that its characteristic expression was what he would have described as one of sardonic gentleness. Yes, the man had taken his medicine.

Vane's lips moved, but he did not speak. During his first year in prison he had divorced his wife, and the costs of the case were set down upon the paper. His forehead showed a frown.

"Any news of—Irene?"

Blagden examined his finger nails.

"Married again. Husband died a year or two ago. Living in town somewhere."

"Is she all right?"

"Oh, quite. He left her a good income, and one child."

Vane nodded and laid the paper on the desk, and, to Blagden, Vane's eyes were tragic.

"Strange old mess, Blaggy. My fault as much as hers. I've had plenty of time to think things out."

His fingers picked a second cigarette from the box, and Blagden

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pushed the matches across to him.

"Then—some philosophy is possible?"

"Oh, yes; they're very decent to you in those places, Blaggy, all of them, the warders, the chaplain, the doctor. No fault of theirs. If your soul gets bleached, or you turn into a balmy, it's the system's fault, not theirs."

Blagden looked at this other man's face.

"Any plans, Harry?"

There was silence, and Blagden could understand that such a question was not easy to answer, and if there was an answer it would depend upon the mental make-up of the man.

"No, nothing definite. It's rather difficult to describe how one feels, yes, rather lost, and a little bewildered. One's a sort of Rip Van Winkle. No illusions left. It's rather difficult to make anything of life when you haven't any illusions left."

He paused, and seemed to watch a little thread of smoke drifting across the window.

"To begin with—in there—the caged animal in me used to rage. I saw red. But there was a decent chap, a warder; he kept his temper with me. He said: 'Look here, my lad, that won't help you, and it doesn't help us. You've got to swallow the stuff. I don't know whether I shouldn't have shot the swine just as you did, but they've given you a life sentence. You'll get five years off it if you behave.'"

He gave Blagden a little whimsical glance of infinite sadness.

"So—I behaved. I became a sort of mechanism. But I had some ways of escape. Sleeping and dreaming. Yes, and books, and thinking about life and the mystery of things. But, you see, all through these years one is working to a time-table. You lose all your initiative. You just obey orders, and when they push you out—you feel strange, naked—and helpless—"

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Again he paused, rolling the cigarette between finger and thumb.

"Yes, one has—as it were—to grow a new skin. I can remember in those early days sitting on my bed, and feeling like a half-starved dog. What would I do when I got out? Paint the town red, have a hell of a time, food and drink and women."

He smiled faintly.

"But that all passed. It's as though one's very appetites become standardized. I feel rather like an old man going back to potter round the old places. I've got to readjust, if readjustment is possible."

He rested his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor.

"Yes, disappear in the crowd, probably. It's not that I'm afraid of the old faces. One doesn't care sufficiently for that. I don't even want to change my name. I'm an old man, Blaggy."

Blagden got up and went and stood by the window.

"Oh, you'll adjust. You look younger and fitter than I thought you would. Life's a good business, even—"

And then he turned suddenly to the man in the chair.

"Look here, come and dine with us to-night. Molly wants you to. She's—"

But Vane looked strangely distressed.


"Thanks, Blaggy. Wonderfully good of you both, but I'd rather not. I'm not up to that sort of thing yet. Faces bother me. Yes, it's funny. I'm afraid of faces—somehow. I can't think and I can't talk. I've got to be myself for a while."

Blagden nodded.

"Yes; in a way—I understand, old man."

"I want to wander about and get used to things. Everything's so new."

CHAPTER TWO



ELSIE SUMMERHAYS was one of those women who are never quite sure either of themselves or of life. She had a conscience that was always standing in front of a mirror and scrutinizing its own reflection, and possibly Elsie's conscience would have found itself less bothered and bewildered if the mirror had remained the same.

But mirrors change, and Elsie had found the mirror of her consciousness to be a distorting-glass, and her dark and earnest eyes had reproached it, for even as a child Elsie had suffered from too much earnestness. She took people and things so seriously; she had ideals, and a very questionable taste in hats. She was one of those women who are doomed to exploitation, for a cynical world—while exploiting Elsie—would always be able to convince her that she was doing her duty.

Her father had exploited her, that Jordan Summerhays, writer of indifferent novels in which the essential vanity of the man had betrayed itself. He had made of Elsie a secretary, a typist and a drudge in an age when all the world's drudges are revolting. Jordan Summerhays having been a very vain man, his womenfolk

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had had to pay for his vanity, for he had gone about displaying himself to the public while his women had washed his shirts for him at home. At all costs he had insisted upon being known as a good fellow, a man ready with a drink or a dinner, generous, jocund, a temperamentalist. He had kept Mary Summerhays in the dark as to his financial status, or rather he had boasted to her as he had boasted to his public.

"Must make a show, Mary. Don't you worry."

And then Mr. Jordan Summerhays had died quite suddenly, and the flimsy curtain of his vanity had been torn down. He had left his widow the furniture in No. 7, Spellwood Terrace, a pile of old manuscripts, an indifferent typewriter, hypothetical royalties and about two hundred and thirty pounds in cash.

Elsie was laying the breakfast table. Her father had been dead six months, and though a magnanimous coterie had passed round the hat in memory of a flamboyant fool, the inevitableness of the disaster had challenged Mary Summerhays and her daughter. No. 7 would have to go, and with it most of the furniture, and Mary Summerhays was betaking herself to a bed-sitting-room in Pulteney Street, off the New King's Road. With equal inevitableness Elsie was chasing a job, and feeling bewildered about it. Her mirror had a cracked and disturbing surface.

Elsie's laying of the breakfast-table was like everything else she did—a very serious business. She hovered over it, gave final and delicate touches to a plate and the marmalade dish, and yet did not notice that she had forgotten to put a loaf of bread on the trencher. That was Elsie all over. Probably she would have noticed the omission if the postman had not climbed the three steps to the door of No. 7, and slipped something through the letter-box. The postmen who visited Spellwood Terrace did not play gaily with brass knockers, but, belonging to a labour-saving generation,

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their activities were casual and surreptitious.

Elsie heard the footsteps and the rattle of the metal shutter, and she hurried into the passage. When you had been waiting for a month on the edge of necessity you were apt to feel a little breathless when the postman called. Previously there had been bills, quite a number of unexpected bills, feathers dropped from the tail of the dead Summerhays. Elsie saw something white lying on the doormat. She went and picked it up.

The envelope thrilled her. She knew at once that it was a letter from the agency that was attempting to join Elsie to a job. She carried it into the little dining-room, and sat down on the sofa; she looked at the envelope, just a little flushed. She hesitated, then with flurried fingers she tore open the envelope, and spread the sheet.

She read:

DEAR MISS SUMMERHAYS,

We have arranged for you to interview Mrs. Pym at Grosvenor House at four o'clock to-day. Mrs. Pym requires a travelling governess and companion for her daughter. Your knowledge of French and Italian should be helpful. We hope the interview will prove satisfactory.

Elsie ran a hand through her none too tidy black hair. It was pretty hair, but Elsie was so serious about other things that she forgot to be sufficiently serious about her hair. She was greatly excited, and then in the midst of her excitement she became conscious of a terrible omission. She had forgotten to wash and whiten the three steps outside the front door.

Those steps were Elsie's heritage and her shame. She had inherited the cleansing of them from the small maid who had been discharged after Mr. Jordan's death. As a rule Elsie would deal with those steps very early in the morning, and before the eyes of

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the vulgar would observe the sacramental act, for both Elsie and her mother retained a faded pride that scented itself with lavender.

Well, the steps could go hang on this particular morning. She went to the foot of the stairs and cried the news.

"Mother, I've just had a letter from the agents."

A door opened above, and Mary Summerhays' grey hair showed over the stair rail.

"They are giving me an interview to-day with a Mrs. Pym.— Oh, bother, the kettle's boiling over!"

She was a long-legged and rather loosely-knit thing, and she dashed up the stairs to pass her mother the letter, and dashed down again to deal with the ebullient kettle. Also there were two eggs to boil, and Mrs. Summerhays disliked a hard egg, which meant that Elsie stood the kitchen clock on a corner of the dresser by the gas-stove and timed her eggs to a second.

Mary Summerhays carried the letter downstairs with her and, putting on her glasses, stood by the window to read it. She was one of those quiet little women with a face like a wise child's, and if her rather tired grey eyes reproached life, it was in silence. For thirty years she had had to bear with Jordan Summerhays' social sensationalism, and she had wondered often how a man could be generous to everybody save the people at home. But she had understood that her husband's humanism had been a public virtue, a gaudy wrapper for the shop-window. Self-advertisement does not begin at home.

Mary read Elsie's letter. Yes, the news sounded very promising. It suggested that if Mrs. Pym and Elsie pleased each other, Elsie would have to go abroad. Mrs. Summerhays looked out of the window, and her eyes were a little sad, for it occurred to her that Elsie would have to do the pleasing, largely because her father had always pleased himself.

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Then Elsie came in with the teapot and the eggs. Her darkly serious face was animated. She was a pale girl, black and white, but this morning her skin seemed to glow.

"Isn't it splendid, mother?"

Mrs. Summerhays looked at her daughter as one woman sometimes looks at another. She had ceased to care much about life, but she cared very much for Elsie.

"It sounds very promising. You'll be expected to go abroad, it seems."

"Isn't it lucky about my languages!—Well, really, what an ass I am!"

For she had turned to cut the bread and discovered the absence of the loaf. And once again, but only momentarily so, the loaf was forgotten. She went quickly to her mother and kissed her.

"Yes, I know what it means. But if I get a decent salary I shall be able to send you something. And I may have time to try my hand at short stories."

Mrs. Summerhays coloured up like a girl. She was a little inarticulate on such occasions.

"Oh, I can manage."

Elsie, looking a little breathless and bright about the eyes, dashed off to collect the loaf from the bread-pan in the larder, and her mother sat down by the tray and placed the letter gently on the table. Elsie was a lovable creature, a little too lovable perhaps for a world that was absorbed in its own affairs. And what sort of woman was this Mrs. Pym?

Elsie, watching her mother remove the top of her egg, made a sudden confession.

"I feel so—so strung up."

"I expect you do, dear."

"The interview's at four. Let's go and sit in the park this after-

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noon. It's a lovely day. Grosvenor House! Rather imposing."

Mrs. Summerhays understood.

"Yes, we'll go and sit in the park."

II

Vane walked as far as the lower end of King's Bench Walk, and beyond the railings he saw a woman sitting in a deck-chair with the autumn leaves falling round her. St. Luke's summer had dried the grass, and two little people in blue were busy, one crawling, the other trailing a toy machine at the end of a string. The woman was sewing, and thinking her own thoughts while the children played in that protected place, and Vane saw them not merely as two young children at play, but as life in a blue jumper at the very beginning of things.

He saw the little, crawling fellow get upon his feet, toddle a few steps, and then with great solemnity fall flat upon his tummy. The woman made a quick movement in the chair, but the blue figure was picking itself up and preparing to begin all over again.

Vane's eyes filled with crinkles of light. A new experience this—watching children at play. To be able to fall flat on your tummy and pick yourself up and try again! How possible it was at that age! And then a voice behind him said: "Mr. Vane, I believe."

Vane turned a startled head. He found himself looking into a fat and sallow face decorated with horn-rimmed spectacles, and the eyes behind the spectacles were brown and glassy. Although the face was young, it had a smeariness. The mouth, soft and flabby, and suggesting pink rubber, was both insolent and weak.

"Yes."

The young man smiled, and when he smiled his pink upper lip curled back.

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"Just a few words, Mr. Vane. You'll excuse me, but nothing like being frank. Yep—rather."

He was voluble. He both fawned and patronized. He laid a little dirty hand against Vane's sleeve.

"The Press, you know. Yes, we're rather ubiquitous—what? No, don't shy off. It's always the human touch we're after. Yep, sure."

Vane stood very still.

"What do you want?"

He spoke sharply, and the young man smiled his rubber smile.

"Now don't go off the deep end, old chap. Look here, you're a human document. Yep. What about something biographical? It's the stuff these days. Say—three articles in the *Sunday Planet*—'My Life in—' "

Vane's voice cut in.

"You have been following me."

"Yep."

"Who put you on this stunt?"

The young man looked knowing.

"That's our business, you know. Inside information, yep. No, I'm not giving anybody away. We have to hunt copy."

There was a stillness about Vane, the stillness of an intense self-restraint.

"So you want me to sell you my fifteen years, so that you can put it on paper?"

"Yep. Half and half. It's a—"

"You go to hell!"

He was conscious of feeling the flare of his own sudden anger, and of the man's flabby little face looking scared and offended. He turned and walked past the fellow.

"Better not follow me again."

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But the little journalist had no shame. He pursued Vane up King's Bench Walk, and across a gravel space, and catching his man in a narrow passage, he accosted him.

"Look here, old chap, no use going in off the deep end. Better be polite. Yep—suggest fifty guineas might be useful. Besides, better keep in with the Press. I know your hotel. We could put in a nice little par. that Vane, the murderer, is staying at the Suffolk after his release. Yep, we're powerful people."

Vane turned on him, and putting the palm of a hand 'against the rubber face, sent the pressman backwards through a dark and convenient doorway. Then he made haste to get lost in the intricacies of the place and, finding himself back at the main gate, he escaped into the Strand.

He found himself becoming very conscious of the crowd. There was more of it than in the old days, and it seemed less purposeful, more dilatory and casual. He wanted to walk fast to get away from that little swine of a journalist, and the crowd dawdled and obstructed. And the amazing newness and prevalence of women! Of course he had heard rumours, but with a memory full of the old flouncy, petticoated days, his glances were almost oblique. So much leg and arm and neck, and in his innocence he had found himself thinking that the world's oldest profession must have prospered enormously since the War. His first walk in the West End had perplexed him considerably. Mouths of cherry and magenta, and smoked eyes, and those funny little shaven necks. Every third girl had suggested the pretty lady. Also, the women looked so much taller, and they seemed to stride.

As he worked his way along the Strand, he felt that he did not belong to this new crowd, and that he did not understand it. Not only was he a kind of shadow man, but these people made him feel like a bewildered ghost. They seemed to move to a new

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rhythm, and to a strange under-chant, the devastating discords of the traffic. Almost they suggested to him mechanized figures, more jerky and spasmodic and restless than those of the old people.

Even the shop-windows were different. Post-war man seemed to go to bed in amazing pyjamas.

And suddenly he felt tired. He wanted to get away from the crowd and the possible recurrence of the little man with the rubber face. The fellow knew the name of his hotel, damn him! He would have to change his hotel. But did it matter? He paused and stood on the kerb, and an empty taxi drifting with the traffic suggested a method of escape.

He hailed the driver.

"Drop me at the bottom of Park Lane."

He got in and slammed the door, and lying back in a corner, closed his eyes. This new world seemed so strange and multitudinous and exhausting.

CHAPTER THREE



VANE opened his eyes.

The taxi had crossed Trafalgar Square and was sweeping with a torrent of traffic through the Admiralty Arch. The Mall lay before him, and its straightness and breadth were familiar and consoling. The blue of the sky had a tinge of gold, as though the autumn colouring of the trees had spread upwards and stained the atmosphere. Carlton House Terrace towered like a white cliff. Distant buildings were the colour of violet.

The taxi-man dropped him at the bottom of Park Lane, and as Vane paid him he was aware of the old fellow's cynical blue eyes, bulbous nose and monstrous grey moustache.

"Thank you, sir."

Vane nodded at him, as though saluting a type that had persisted, and turning away, walked along by the railings until he came to a gate. He saw people sitting on green chairs. There seemed to him to be hundreds of green chairs, and hundreds of figures seated on them in the gentle October sunlight. Mounds of colour glowed down below there among the trees—beds of dahlias and chrysanthemums and autumn asters, and as he strolled

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the world was like a painted world, the grass an emerald green, the soil of the Row the colour of bronze. He was very conscious of all these colours.

For a minute or two Vane stood leaning against some iron railings watching the cars passing by, and the figures moving under the trees. It was all very vivid to him, and both familiar and strange. The flower-beds in the distance glowed like dishes of piled fruit. The October air had a soft tang, and the fallen leaves a crispness, and these swift impressions tantalized him as though life was a white bird beating its wings in his face. The flurry of the traffic, this world of men and of women, and he was alone. He began to realize his loneliness and its inevitableness; he felt sad.

He strolled on. He walked as far as the Serpentine, and back along the Row, and his feeling of loneliness increased. He was part of the crowd and yet sundered from it by a sensitive self-consciousness that shrank from contact with these other humans. And yet he was aware of life as a little kindling flame within him—hunger, pain, the provocation of a perfume. He wanted to immerse himself in the crowd, sit with it, walk with it, talk with it.

Vane turned aside and sat down in a vacant chair. It was one of a row ranged along the curve of an asphalt path and in the full sunshine. He had an empty chair on either side, and beyond the chair on his right an old man was reading a newspaper. On his left two women were sitting in silence, as though enjoying the sunshine, and Vane noticed that the older woman's shoes were very shabby. The girl's shoes looked new, but he noticed that one of her black silk stockings had a small hole in it, and he found himself wondering whether she knew of the existence of that blemish.

He studied the two pairs of feet before raising his eyes momentarily to the two faces. The elder woman was seated next to

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him, and he had to lean forward slightly to see the girl's face, and as he did so their eyes met. Her eyelids gave a little flicker, and almost instantly she turned her face away as though she was sensitive to such scrutiny, and Vane, feeling an equal shyness, sat back in his chair with his eyes to the front.

He was aware of the girl changing the position of her feet. She spoke to her companion.

"I ought to be moving in a minute. It's a quarter to four."

She opened a vanity-bag that lay in her lap, took out a small mirror and glanced at herself in it, and Vane got the impression that she was feeling nervous about something. He saw the older woman's hand make a gentle movement and rest for a moment on the girl's knee.

"Don't worry."

"Oh, I'm not worrying, but it's rather like the five minutes before an exam."

And then she gave a little self-conscious laugh. She had a pleasant, quiet voice that ended on a poignant note, and to Vane its quality seemed to match her serious, dark gaze. She put the mirror back into her bag, and drew in one foot with a suggestion of restlessness. Her two hands clasped the bag. She looked straight before her.

"Are you coming? Or are you going to stay here?"

"Oh, I think I'll stay here, dear."

"Then I'll come back."

Elsie Summerhays stood up.

"Well—I think I'll get it over."

She bent down and kissed her mother, and walked away under the trees. She was feeling nervous, quite absurdly nervous, for she was taking this interview with characteristic seriousness. What sort of woman was this Mrs. Pym? She chose the broad path going

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north towards the Marble Arch, and followed it until the new red brick bulk of Grosvenor House came into view. The vastness of the place frightened her; it seemed to tower above her little adventure and make her and her affairs appear so utterly unimportant. Hundreds and hundreds of windows, the eyes of a prosperous and potent world looking down at her insignificance, and for a moment she stood still as though she could not bring herself to challenge all that vastness. But how absurd! She put her chin up and walked on, and crossing the road found herself outside the entrance. She was aware of a porter in livery.

She spoke to him, and her chin quivered.

"I've come to see Mrs. Pym."

The man gave her a cursory glance.

"Better ask at the inquiry office, miss."

She entered. She stood there for a moment rather like a shy animal hustled into some strange, big building. It seemed so very full of people, and she felt that everyone was looking at her. She stood there, as though she had lost the power of movement.

A boy in livery approached her.

"Excuse me, miss, but are you Miss Bonsor?"

"No—I'm Miss Summerhays. I've come to see Mrs. Pym."

The boy looked amused. He was so much more assured than she was, and wasn't it funny the way her chin quivered!

"Inquiries over there."

She found herself addressing a very suave young man in black who seemed to preside over acres of polished wood.

"I have an appointment with Mrs. Pym, please."

"What name?"

"Summerhays."

The young man took down a telephone receiver, carried on a brief conversation, and then beckoned to a page.

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"Take the lady up to No. 73."

She went up in a lift with the page-boy and the attendant, and was discharged into a corridor.

"This way, please."

The boy's voice seemed to echo in the corridor. It emphasized the solemn, spacious silence. Did anyone ever dare to speak here or ring bells unless they were people of supreme importance? The very carpet said "Hush," and Elsie, in her thirty-three and eleven black frock, and with a chin that was most absurdly tremulous, began to magnify Mrs. Pym into a moneyed goddess of extreme proportions, a person to whom it would be impossible to say: "I must ask for four guineas a week." Four guineas, when the very sumptuousness of the place would be shocked by the blurting of such bathos.

The boy knocked at a door. A thin, high-pitched voice that trailed a frayed edge answered from within.

"Come in."

The boy opened the door.

"Lady to see Mrs. Pym."

II

Elsie saw a woman in a bright green frock seated on a black sofa, and her first glimpse of Mrs. Pym reminded her of those brilliant window displays where the light is concentrated upon one figure and one miraculous frock. Even Mrs. Pym's permanent wave was a perfect product, if somewhat brassy. She was a little woman with high cheek-bones and a high colour, a nose that spread itself into inflated nostrils, a very red mouth that lacked finish and seemed to end in raw edges. Her eyebrows had been plucked. She was smoking a cigarette in a long green holder.

Her eyes were peculiar, and they suggested to Elsie stones that

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emitted a bluish glare. Mrs. Pym stared at her, and her scrutiny was deliberate and comprehensive, and she was so obviously at her ease that Elsie felt all the more uncomfortable—a thirty-three and eleven product in the presence of the Rue de la Paix.

“Miss Summerhays?”

“Yes.”

“Sit down.”

Mrs. Pym levelled her cigarette-holder at a chair. Her voice had a thin and metallic timbre, and as Elsie moved towards the chair she discovered that there was another woman in the room, a black-and-white lady who sat over the fire in an attitude of sinuous stealth, and who was studying her with oblique and dispassionate candour. This second figure also belonged to the world's shop-window, and though it was of white wax the wax had a hardness.

Elsie sat down, with her hands clasped in her lap. She was feeling acutely uncomfortable, and her fingers wanted to fidget. She was conscious of the short silence, an appraising silence, and it seemed to last such a long time.

Mrs. Pym addressed her.

“I suppose those people at the agency made everything plain to you. I want someone to look after my kid and give her lessons, and to write my letters, and see to everything when we're travelling. They tell me you speak French and Italian.”

Elsie gave Mrs. Pym a little nervous smile. Her knowledge of French and Italian had become suddenly a very raw and unfinished accomplishment.

“Yes.”

“Been abroad at all?”

“Yes, twice, when my father was alive.”

She did not say that her exploring of Europe had not extended

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beyond the Ardennes and the coast of Normandy. Mrs. Pym's blue eyes were fixed on her, and so were the eyes of the dark and sinuous lady by the fire.

"I can type, and I have a little knowledge of shorthand."

Mrs. Pym blew smoke.

"I take it you can teach Sally the ordinary stuff?"

Elsie winced.

"How old is your daughter?"

"Seven."

"Oh, yes, I could manage that."

"Any references?"

Elsie's hands wriggled.

"No educational references, but I can give you the names of people who knew my father. I acted as his secretary."

"Wrote novels, didn't he?"

"Yes."

There was a pause, and Elsie was aware of the two women exchanging glances. The room seemed very hot.

"About terms."

Elsie stiffened.

"Yes, the agency suggested four guineas a week."

Mrs. Pym's blue glance seemed to narrow.

"That's rather stiff. You see—you'll have all your expenses paid. I'm offering three pounds a week."

The woman by the fire was heard for the first time. She drawled:

"That's about the market price, I think. First-class hotels, Miss Summerhays, and everything *de luxe*. Really, that's very generous."

Elsie fidgeted. What business had this other person to cut in? And she wanted to explain to these two women that her mother was very badly off, but she had a feeling that such explanations would seem shabby and superfluous. She might as well have con-

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fessed to these two women that her frock had cost her just so much at Messrs. Vine & Gillingsworth's.

Moreover, these two women of the world knew so much more about life than she did, and it was to be her first job, and of course travelling with such a woman as Mrs. Pym must be a costly business. Her sensitive and diffident self consented.

"Yes—I suppose as all my expenses are to be paid I ought to be content with three pounds a week."

Mrs. Pym removed the stump of the cigarette from her holder.

"We are leaving in about ten days' time. You can manage that? Provided—any references you can give me are satisfactory."

"Yes, I can manage."

"You'll have to get a passport. We shall be abroad about six months. Yes, you may as well see Sylvia. You might fetch the kid in, Sybil. Oh—I haven't introduced you to Miss Gasson. We travel together."

Miss Gasson went out of the room and returned with Sylvia Pym. The child was very much a miniature double of her mother, tow-headed, with curious blue eyes and an unfinished mouth.

"Sally—we call her that, mostly—this is Miss Summerhays who is going to give you lessons."

The child stared fixedly at Elsie as though she was absorbing the whole of Elsie and all that Elsie signified, and Miss Summerhays held out a hand.

"How do you do, Sylvia."

The child maintained a wickedly demure face. She was mimicking Elsie, but Elsie was innocent, and did not know her Sylvia.

"How do you do, Miss Summerhays."

They shook hands solemnly, and then Sally was removed by Miss Gasson with what seemed to Elsie unnecessary expedition. Mrs. Pym lit another cigarette, and jiggled a small gold shoe.

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"Sylvia's all right. Just a bit—young. You'll be firm with her. You might let me have those references."

"Yes."

"I shan't want you till the day before we leave, and I dare say you'll want to get clothes and things. You'll need an evening frock or two. So—I take it—that's settled."

Elsie rose.

"I hope—I shall be able— Yes, I'll do my best with Sylvia. I'll arrange at once for the references to be sent you. And thank you so much for taking me."

Mrs. Pym gave her one of those curious stares.

"That's all right, Miss Summerhays. I have your address, haven't I? Yes. If the references are all right, I think we can say that it's settled."

Miss Gasson came into the room just as the outer door of the suite was closing on Elsie. She helped herself to a cigarette and returned to her perch by the fire.

"Very bourgeois."

"Yes, dowdy, but none the worse for that."

Miss Gasson lit her cigarette.

"A serious and earnest young person. My dear, it is very necessary that the world should contain a sufficiency of serious and earnest young persons."

Mrs. Pym jigg'd a foot.

"Well, she may last six months. Sally broke the last one in three. That damned kid gets on my nerves."

III

Vane sat on his green chair, and felt more and more lonely. He wanted to talk to someone, and being sandwiched between an elderly woman and an old fellow who had the air of retired civil

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servant, he was piqued by the propinquity of these two people. Here were three humans sitting in a row as mute as three stuffed dolls, while the autumn leaves drifted down and the sun went west, and winter was in the air.

He cast an appraising glance at the creature on his right. The old gentleman had folded up his paper and tucked it between his knees. He had a neat profile, a grey moustache, rather pendulous lower lids, and a polished chin. He would be precise and well informed, a citizen who read his *Times* conscientiously, and was politically blue. The narrow face was dry and chilly. Life had left no warmth there.

Vane was provoked by a sudden impulse. Why should he not try the effect of his voice on his right-hand neighbour? He did so. He said: "Perfect October day, isn't it?"

The old gentleman's chin gave a jerk. He looked at Vane with a kind of oblique, mistrustful hauteur. He scrutinized Vane's hat, his tie and collar, and his clothes, and then removed the folded paper from between his knees.

"Yes, quite seasonable. Cold as soon as the sun goes down."

But he had been disturbed. He was uneasy and suspicious. He ran dry fingers over the folded paper, cleared his throat, and prepared for a discreet departure. Funny place, Hyde Park! Yes, you never quite knew who was going to sit down beside you, though, as a rule, you were safer on a twopenny chair than on a free seat. Even the most unlikely people inveigled you into a gossip and then told a tale.

Again there was that dry clearing of the throat.

"It is getting just a little bit chilly."

Without looking directly at Vane, but keeping him under observation, the old gentleman collected a stick that was reposing against the railings, rose and walked away.

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Vane felt snubbed. What a peer, unfriendly world it was, so self-conscious and mistrustful! or was this the old England where people still sat apart in pews, and barricaded themselves behind newspapers in the corners of first-class railway carriages? Had he said to his late neighbour: "I have been an occupant of one of His Majesty's penal prisons for fifteen years, and I have been at liberty for three whole days," respectability's reaction could not have been more chilling. Had such words as outcast, publican, pariah retained a social finality? Was England still afraid of sex and psychology and the shabby person on the seat? Moreover, he was not a shabby person, but just a Wandering Jew wearing trousers cut in Bond Street. His tailor had carried out a very successful improvisation, and without a fitting had delivered him new clothes cut to his pre-War measurements, and in prison one does not put on fat.

Queer world! Murder, penal servitude, the autumn trees scattering crisp gold upon the brilliant grass. Crude ugliness, and beauty, a beauty that hurt, and instinctively he glanced at the face of the woman on his left. She was sitting there quite motionless, her faded eyes either looking into the future or back into the past, and he realized that she was in some sort of dream and utterly unaware of him. He was less than a shadow, or there might have been infinite space between them. He made no attempt to speak to her. She was utterly apart, absorbed in her own little mystery.

The sun was setting, and the green chairs seemed to slip into the shadow. The air grew chilly, and the woman beside him betrayed another sort of carefulness. She was afraid of catching cold, for in her circumstances she could not afford to catch cold. She gave a little twitch of the shoulders, looked at a watch, rose and walked away. Mrs. Summerhays was going to meet her daughter.

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Vane sat on. The green chairs emptied and people passed to and fro in front of him—people who were going home, and he knew that his own evening would end in a hotel bedroom. Was there any place more unfriendly and anonymous and frigid than an hotel bedroom?

And then he was aware of the girl with the hole in her stocking approaching along the path. Her feet brushed among the leaves, and the light of the afterglow was on her face. She came to the row of vacant chairs, paused, looked up and down as though it occurred to her that she must have chosen the wrong path or returned to a different row of chairs. She looked confused.

Vane raised his hat.

"Excuse me, if you are looking for your friend, she left here two or three minutes ago."

Her glance was startled and darkly distant.


"Thank you. Can you tell me—?"

"She went in the direction of Park Lane."

"Thank you. I must have missed her."

And without looking at him again she walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER FOUR



WANE sat on. The light was leaving the tops of the trees, and the autumn twilight seemed to take to itself a moist, cold perfume. The grass grew more deeply and intensely green, and then a tinge of greyness began to spread, and those little flakes of yellow light in the fallen leaves, faded into the gradual dusk. Empty chairs, and people hurrying home, and the distant roll of the traffic, and a kind of blue gloom that became flecked with lights. The chill of the dusk seemed to strike inwards, and his feeling of loneliness became acute. He began to wish that he had accepted Blagden's invitation and gone to dine there. A fire, and lights, and faces. And the eyes of Blagden's wife, friendly, and perhaps compassionate, and veiling their curiosity. Yes, he was afraid of eyes, and in that cold, clear twilight he felt afraid of many things—life, himself, that hotel bedroom, the faces of the hotel staff, the porter who always seemed to be standing by the glass doors and who watched him enter. This strange, poignant dread of his new world seemed to envelop him like the twilight.

What should he do with himself? Where could he go? He

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seemed to be sitting there encased in the cold and crystalline shell of his own self-consciousness. Then a movement disturbed him. A young woman in a green coat edged with fur was sitting down in the chair that Mrs. Summerhays had occupied. She wore a little black hat fitting closely to her head, black silk stockings, and black shoes. A yellow silk vanity-bag lay in her lap, and her two hands rested on the bag.

She sat and looked into the distance as though the man on the next chair but one did not exist for her. She had a plump and pallid face, eyes whose brown irises were flecked with little tawny streaks, a cherry-coloured mouth. Almost, she was statuesque; she did not seem to breathe, but to Vane she was suddenly and acutely disturbing. A faint drift of perfume came from her.

He glanced surreptitiously at her profile. She was pretty, but with something of the hardness of white wax. The set of the lips and nostrils was enigmatic. She sat and stared, and yet he suspected her of being fully aware of his scrutiny. Her lashes trembled almost imperceptibly. Abruptly, she unfastened her bag with long fingers, the nails of which were tinted with some reddish pigment. She took out a cigarette case, opened it, and picked out a cigarette. She looked again into her bag. She spoke, but without looking at Vane.

"Excuse me, got a match?"

He produced a box of matches. He felt suddenly and vividly on the edge of an experience. The impact of her voice upon his consciousness was like a clash of sound, vibrant and emotional.

He said: "Rather pleasant out here."

She tapped the cigarette on the gold case, lit one of his matches and held the flame to the cigarette. Then she returned him his matchbox, and the tips of their fingers touched.

"Ta. Yes, nice and fresh, isn't it?"

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She blew a smoke-ring, and then she offered him her cigarette case.

"Have one."

He hesitated. She both disturbed and perplexed him. She was all new and polished, and just like dozens of other girls he had passed in the streets, and yet there was a meretriciousness, a something. But why should he care, at his age, with his temples growing a little grey? She was a woman. He took one of her cigarettes.

"Thank you."

She smiled, and when she smiled the angles of her mouth lifted in a queer way, and the retracted upper lip showed a full row of her teeth. Her eyes examined him, his clothes, his age. Yes, he was the profitable age.

"Just watching things, are you?"

"Yes, just watching things."

"Same here. Idle rich! Not quite. It always amuses me to look at the toffs going out to dine at the Berkeley or to Claridge's. Suppose you haven't dined?"

"No."

It occurred to him to wonder. But how did he know that she was that sort of woman? He was so out of touch with things. Certainly her voice was just a little strident and suggestive.

"I'm staying in London."

"Up from the country?"

"Yes."

That too was promising. She appraised him. His clothes were new and well cut.

"Makes you feel a bit lonely—perhaps. All by yourself, I suppose?"

He nodded. He found himself strangely agitated. The human contact was so provocative, the very scent of her, her chin, her

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neck, even her cherry-coloured mouth.

"Yes, London is lonely. Strange, isn't it? All these people—"

A green dusk was falling. She moved to the chair next to his. Imperceptibly one of her knees had approached his.

"Yes, makes me feel like that sometimes. Makes you feel you want a friend."

Friend! The word had a peculiar effect on him. He found himself wondering what the effect on her would be were he to tell her that he had served fifteen years for murder? Friend! He could imagine her flinching and walking quickly away. Yes, even though she might happen to be—

He said: "So you feel like that! Doesn't it strike you as extraordinary that there should be all these people and no one to talk to?"

She seemed nearer to him.

"Well, what's the matter? You're talking to me."

Her skirt touched him.

"Anything wrong with that?"

"No."

"Well, that's all right, isn't it?"

She gave a little laugh. He met her oblique glance in the dusk. Something trembled in him almost boyishly, something that was more than sex. For, at that moment, she seemed to symbolize life, the tang of this October evening, all that he had lacked and suffered for, the strange and strangled apathy of all those years. He desired her, because she was woman, flesh, a perfume, something intimate and alive.

He looked at her.

"Yes, there is nothing wrong with you."

She closed her bag with a faint snap.

"Let's stroll. I've got a little place off the Edgware Road."

She got up with a flick of the skirts and a kind of jocular, rally-

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ing glance at him. He went with her.

II

In the night he supposed that she believed him to be asleep. He was lying awake, but completely still, when he both felt and heard her leave the bed. He had hung his coat on the brass knob of a bed-post. The room was in darkness but he saw the shape of her dimly against the window-sill. She was at his coat.

He lay very still. He was not conscious of feeling angry. There were a few notes in his wallet, for he had handed over the rest of his cash to the clerk in the hotel office and had had it locked up in the office safe. He heard the faint rustling of the paper, a very small and sad sound in the stillness, like the crepitations of dead leaves. She was taking his money and he was not angry. He realized now that she had suffered his embraces, all that human and intimate contact, because it was her business to suffer such things. He had been rather shy like an awkward boy, and she had been nice to him, and easy, like a good-natured nurse. At the end of it all he had found himself feeling strangely dissatisfied and ashamed, but not on her account. He had experienced compassion. The sadness of sporadic sex! He had turned over and pretended to go to sleep.

He heard her steal across the room towards the mantelpiece. He supposed that she was hiding the notes there. He did not regret them. He was realizing their two separate entities which no physical contact could merge, the essence of the young woman of the streets and that of the middle-aged man who paid. He felt no disgust, but he did feel a great sadness, the slipping away of an illusion. Appetite, just what was it? And compassion?

She returned to the bed. She appeared to stand and listen. She had taken both her fee and her perquisite, and after all—could he blame her? Very gently she lay down beside him, and her

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noiselessness did not strike him as treacherous; it was like the glide of some soft warm animal back to its nest. He closed his eyes and pretended to breathe deeply.

Did she expect him to examine his pocket-book in the morning? Did she count on his being too shy and self-conscious to accuse her of having relieved him of the money? He did not know, and he did not care. He did not grudge her the money.

For a great sorrowfulness fell upon him. It was as though he had realized in that alien room the utterness of his isolation. He was a stranger in a strange world. He could buy this and he could buy that. He could purchase the compliance of a particular sort of woman. But that which you could buy was worth nothing. Of course—in a sense he had known it, but he had not realized that it could hurt. Things that were given alone mattered.

His sadness somehow slipped into sleep. He lay as a stranger beside this strange woman, but during those minutes of wakefulness he had become alive to other realities.

He escaped very early. She had pretended to be asleep, and had allowed him to dress and slip out of the room, but he had been quite sure that she had been watching him. The surreptitious silence of his escape was part of the mood of the morning. He saw the empty street and a collection of dustbins waiting to be dealt with, and two or three prowling cats.

III

Vane returned to his hotel, and in the vestibule he caught himself explaining to a sleepy and uninterested night-porter that he had been kept by friends in the country. He was surprised to find himself fabricating such a lie. Now that he had returned to the herd was he so socially sensitive that he felt it to be his duty to propitiate hotel servants?

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The man yawned. Probably he had heard that tale before.

"What number, sir?"

"I've got my key."

But the porter developed a sudden quality of suspiciousness, and after taking Vane up in the lift, followed him along the corridor, and watched him apply the key to the door.

"If you want your boots cleaning, sir, better leave 'em with me."

Vane, finding that the man reminded him too forcibly of a warder, left his boots and half a crown with him, and the door closed like the door of a cell.

He had decided to leave the Suffolk, and after breakfast he called for his bill and announced his departure. He looked up other hotels in a directory, and chose one of the smaller and more modest hotels in Bloomsbury—the Melrose—for it was not likely that he would meet familiar faces in Bloomsbury. But he had not forgotten the little, rubber-faced journalist, and when his very new luggage was brought out to the taxi, he gave the driver a fictitious address—Hotel Russell—and not till they were under way did he call through the speaking-tube: "I've made a mistake. The Melrose Hotel, not the Russell. It's in Tavistock Square."

When the taxi stopped outside the Melrose, Vane got out to inquire about a room. A tired and sandy-haired woman in the bureau offered him No. 12.

"Register, please."

He signed his name and gave the address of his solicitors, and was taken in charge by a shabby, bald-headed porter who carried two new suit-cases and a kit-bag up to No. 12.

"That's the lot, sir."

He was a cheerful person, and Vane thought his cheerfulness worth a florin.

"Thanks."

"Thank you, sir."

He disappeared, leaving behind him a faint aroma of perspiration and pragmatism, and Vane sat on a chair by the window and looked at his luggage. Yes, as the porter had put it—that was the lot, all that he possessed, save securities quotable on the Stock Exchange and a considerable balance at his bank. Suits, shirts, socks, underwear, three pairs of pyjamas, collars, ties, and sundries. A man could possess just so much, or everything and nothing. And this room was four walls, ceiling and floor, a window, a fumed oak bed and other objects to match. Nothing in it was intimately his, just as nothing in this new world appeared to be his. He could buy the use of a room just as he had bought the body of a girl, and hundreds of other people had used this room, and scores of men had for a night possessed that live body, and feeling sad and depressed he got up to unpack.

But the room seemed determined to remind him of a previous occupant, for he found a couple of hairpins on the dressing-table, and hairpins belong to an obsolete generation. They have ceased to be associated with any romantic quality, but Vane was innocent, and the thing that did concern him was that they were just such hairpins as his wife had used. He picked one up, and holding it in the palm of his hand, stared at it. There was nothing mystical about this hairpin, and he did not think of it as belonging to any particular woman. It was a sort of universal, a timeless object, like a blue bead taken from an Egyptian tomb, or a Roman fibula recovered from the ruins of a villa.

He smiled faintly. He remembered that the woman who had been his wife was living somewhere in London. She had a child. She had married some other fellow, after he had shot her lover and divorced her. But how strange! And how very long ago it seemed, the War and its elementals, its sex storms and agonies, its

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cold, brooding rages, its very laughter.

He threw both those hairpins out of the window, and unpack making a complete and formal business of it. He had nothing to do; for fifteen years he had been the creature of an office routine, a sort of living time-table, a clock that was wound up and regulated. Cells, slops, parade, roll-call, labour. He put his shirt and collars in one drawer, pyjamas and underclothing in another. His movements were deliberate and gentle. The arranging of his smaller possessions on the dressing-table kept him occupied for three minutes. He was like a child making a pattern with his brushes, comb, nail-scissors, razor, a writing-pad and a notebook. But why had he bought a writing-pad? He had no one to write to, and very few relations, a couple of cousins who were little better than strangers.

He placed two new pipes and a tin of tobacco on the mantelpiece. There was a mirror over the mantelpiece, and he caught sight of his reflection in it, and somehow it surprised him. The glass showed him the man of 1930. His hair seemed to have slipped back a little, and he was grey at the temples. There were lines. His eyes were the same, and yet not the same. He looked at himself with a kind of sardonic, gentle wonder.

Vane went downstairs. He wanted to rid himself of too much ready cash, and he asked the manageress to take charge of fifty pounds in notes. She counted the notes, slipped them into an envelope and sealed it. The red wax matched the colour of her mouth.

"I'll put them in the safe."

"Thank you."

"Wait, I must give you a receipt."

She had the air of a woman who had taught herself to suppress all that part of life that had no relation to business. Her fingers scratched. Her hair and her skin were so much of a colour that

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neck and hair appeared to merge, and Vane found himself wondering why she reddened her mouth. It seemed superfluous.

She gave him the receipt, and he returned to the lounge-hall, where he met the bald-headed porter with a fistful of letters. The man smiled at him.

"Nothing for you, sir. Vane is the name—I think?"

"Yes."

He was not expecting any letters, and his official address was that of Messrs. Blagden & Stephens, but he asked the porter a question:

"Have you a smoking-room here?"

"I'll show you, sir."

He led Vane down a tiled passage.

"Gent.'s lavatory to the right, sir."

He opened a door and uncovered a long and rather shabby room, very stale and static as to its atmosphere, and with a window looking out upon a yard. The lower sash was filled with frosted glass. The room contained four arm-chairs and a sofa in brown leather, two brass-topped tables, a book-case, and another table upon which were arranged an assortment of periodicals, catalogues and directories. The carpet was a Turkey with the pile worn thin.

"You can smoke in 'ere, sir, or in the lounge."

"Rather cold."

"I'll put a match to the fire."

He did so, and remained squatting there while the flames licked their way through the paper and wood.

"That's more like 'ome, sir."

Vane thanked him, and the man departed, and Vane strolled to the table and examined the magazines. They did not pique him. One dealt with motor-cars, another with broadcasting, and the B.B.C. was an unknown world to him. Someone had left a copy of the *Morning Post* on the sofa, and Vane collected it and sat

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down in one of the arm-chairs with his back to the window.

IV

A man came into the smoking-room and without looking at Vane began to rummage among the magazines on the table, and he made such a fuss about it that Vane looked at him over the top of his paper. He saw a clergyman with a baldish head, short stout legs, and a massive neck. Moreover the clergyman's head had grown bald in a particular style of its own, and the hair that remained was carefully parted from the crown to the nape of the neck. Its colour was a sandyish grey. Two very florid and fleshy ears stuck out rather like handles on a jug.

Vane's attention was challenged. There was something familiar about the back of that head, though he had to allow memory a lapse of fifteen years. He could remember just such a baldness, and a persuasive and almost pedantic parting of such sandyish hair. Also, the set of the ears, and the fellow's fussy movements were familiar. And then while he was trying to revive some associative link, the man faced about suddenly, and eyeing Vane's paper, spoke.

"Excuse me, is that your *Morning Post*?"

Vane knew him at once. It was a cousin of his, the Rev. Theodore Vane, who, fifteen years ago, had been a curate at a West End church. Theodore had always been a social person, oily and anxious and progressive. His baldness had suggested the tonsure. He had had a fine, rolling voice, and he had always spoken of God as "Gud."

Vane sat and stared at this face. It seemed to grow more round, the blue eyes, the pink little pucker of a mouth, the chin. Theo was recognizing him, but he was recognizing him with inward reservations and with a growing awareness of the awkwardness of the

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occasion. Almost Vane could watch the mind of the man at work. It had exclaimed, perhaps it had exclaimed "Good God!" and instantly had dropped a smothering pillow upon the inward ejaculation. It stood and stared and savoured this embarrassing encounter. It indulged in silent comments upon it.

Vane felt a little twinge of shame, and this shame was tinged with scorn. The face of his cousin was so socially significant. Theodore in a surplice intoning the Litany! And he made haste to break the rather clogging silence, conscious of an acrid smell of humour. How extraordinary that he and his cousin should have blundered up against each other in this hotel room! Blundered. Yes, that was the very word. Theodore had the look of a man into whom some other fellow had blundered heavily in the street.

"Is this your paper?"

He did not move from his chair. Almost he could hear his cousin's round mouth uttering the words: "So you are out? Extraordinary, but I had forgotten. Wasn't it twenty years?" He was aware of the other man moving slowly towards him like a large black bubble. What happened when such a human bubble burst? He let the paper sink to his knees. It made a rustling sound.

"Surely—?"

Vane saw a white cuff and a pink hand. He moved in his chair.

"Yes."

"Extraordinary! My dear Harry—"

He stood looming over Vane, carefully confronting the inevitable. Almost he was an edifice, an institution, whose delicate fabric was the product of thirty conventional years. And somehow Vane got the impression that Theodore had prospered. He had the plumpness and the polish of a little dignitary up from the country, and unaccustomed to such disconcerting occasions.

"My dear Harry—"

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He sat down suddenly in one of the leather chairs. He looked turgid, swollen. His collar cut into his fat neck. He was sententiously equal to normal crises, but in the thick of this situation he seemed to perspire. And Vane observed him. Theo was like a gooseberry that had never ripened. He provoked a sardonic puckishness. But how significant! To feel the rumblings of a shocked embarrassment, to appreciate the providence of that carefully parted hair, and the perplexities of that high, bald forehead.

Suddenly they found themselves talking. Theodore had always been a talker. Set him rolling and he seemed to go on smoothly, like a rubber ball rolling down a groove. Perpetual motion; oiled, gentle bumpings over obstacles. He was a man who put on platitudes like a succession of sacerdotal vestments and felt happy in them, and reassured.

"You must really forgive me, but I had not been prepared. You see—I understood—I presumed—"

"It was twenty years."

"Ah—twenty years."

"I was excused five years."

"I see. Good—conduct?"

His soft pink mouth seemed to boggle the words. His blue eyes had a vagueness. He was groping, and groping inwardly, trying to dissociate words and feelings. He was so dependent upon words, academic and resonant words, revelation, mystery, convocation, beneficence. He could not get on without words, and somehow no words seemed adequate. He kept giving this social outcast little blinking glances. He was thinking of the other man as a social anachronism, and that was his trouble.

"Really, most extraordinary—our meeting like this. I suppose you have just—"

"A few days. I came here this morning."

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His cousin made a soothing and suggestive movement with one hand, as though stroking the air.

"Quite. I understand."

He continued to flounder, but he was recovering a sense of direction. He wanted to be kind, and he also wanted to be careful. Ursula was a very exacting and upright person. Also, there were the children. And he was a rural dean.

"My dear Harry, one feels oneself rather in the air. To you, if I may say so—this emergence must be particularly—Yes—I quite understand. The abnormal tension of those days. Tragedies—"

But he was growing inquisitive, sympathetically inquisitive, and anxious. It was natural that he should regard Vane as a live shell left over from the period of the War. Such shells sometimes exploded if they were tampered with. Careful handling—tact.

"Tragedies. It is necessary to understand life. I rather wish you had warned me. If you had written—"

Vane lay back in his chair with his eyes half closed. He looked apathetic, weary.

"One doesn't write, you know. Better not. I don't wish to link up. I have money to live on. After all, one is a ghost."

"Then—I take it—"

"But I'm not a ghost that haunts people. You may postulate a certain sort of pride. I should prefer to disappear."

He saw that his cousin was relieved. The tightness of his pink skin seemed to relax. He grew almost genial.

"I think I understand. A kind of rebirth—rehabilitation. An admirable attitude. I suppose—you will go abroad?"

Vane's eyes were mere slits.

"Yes, probably. Naturally one has to look around, try to get one's bearings. It's a very new world."

His cousin boomed like a signal gun.

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"A prodigiously new world. But—after all—that makes some things more possible. Evolution—"

And suddenly he pulled out his watch.

"It's a great pity. I have to catch the 12.50 from St. Pancras. Yes, lunching on the train. Yes, that was my copy of the *Morning Post*. I came in here to collect it. Most extraordinary coincidence."

He stood up.

"No, please keep the paper. Now, between man and man, if I can do anything—"

Vane's eyes were almost shut. He rose and went to the window and opened the lower sash a foot.

"Thanks. But to be frank—I would prefer—annihilation. I presume you believe in hell—Theo. I don't. Except perhaps—in the hell of old associations. Yes, good-bye. You mustn't miss your train."

He stood thinking. Hadn't Theodore suggested that he should go abroad? Why shouldn't he go abroad?

CHAPTER FIVE



MARY SUMMERHAYS explored.

Elsie was out, saying good-bye to friends, and Elsie's mother invaded Elsie's room, and opened drawers and wardrobe, for if Elsie was a little careless about her clothes that same carelessness had been created by necessity. As her father's typist and secretary she had been credited with an allowance, but for the last two or three years much of her allowance had remained on credit.

Mrs. Summerhays' pale and deliberate hands took down dresses and hung them up again, and explored the privacies of her daughter's underclothing. Yes, as she had suspected their condition was deplorable, and there was no need for her to hold the garments to the light. Her daughter's wardrobe was suffering from a universal shabbiness, and Mary Summerhays stood thinking.

Poor Elsie!

And though poverty can be relative, the mother was moved to compassion. Mr. Jordan Summerhays—that public person and inveterate diner-out—had to the last gone forth with an immaculate white waistcoat and a case of cigars. Mrs. Summerhays passed to her own room, and unlocking a drawer extracted an old jewel

case. She placed it on the dressing-table and when she raised the lid the October sunlight played on a few rings and brooches, a Victorian necklace, a gold bracelet, and a watch. The vanities of her youth! Mr. Summerhays had not left her much vanity. She explored elsewhere. She had two Sheffield plate entrée dishes and four salt-cellar wrapped up in tissue paper at the bottom of a drawer. She packed the jewel-case and the plate into a small suit-case, put on a hat and coat, and going out into Spellwood Terrace she happened upon a strolling taxi.

She allowed herself and her adventure that taxi.

"Drive me to Smart's in Duke Street. Yes, I think it is in Duke Street. The jewellers and silversmiths."

"That's it, ma'am."

He drove her there.

Mary Summerhays had known other desperate occasions, but this was a different affair, less consciously shabby and far happier in its inspiration. She carried her suit-case into the shop, and was met by a suave young man in black.

"Good morning, madam."

She did not prevaricate, and her pride was in her purpose.

"I have some things to sell. I understand that you purchase plate and jewellery."

His manner became a little less charming, for insensibly she had become the suppliant, he—the autocrat.

"Yes, we do—buy."

She noticed that he ceased to address her as madam. He allowed her to place her shabby old suit-case on the counter, and then he diverged to attend to another customer who had entered. She heard his glaucous voice.

"Shagreen toilet sets? Yes, madam, we have a very nice selection. If you will come this way, please."

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Presently he returned to her, and was joined by an abrupt and bulky person with an aggressive grey moustache. Mary Summerhays opened her suit-case and displayed its contents, and the man with the moustache screwed a magnifying glass into his left eye and examined the jewellery. He was laconic but not offensive. He was doing business.

"Not worth very much to us, I'm afraid. Poor stones. The necklace, absolutely no demand for such a specimen."

But he was kinder to the Sheffield plate. It was genuine.

"Yes, we might make you an offer for this. Can you produce any guarantee?"

She looked surprised.

"Guarantee? It has been in my family—"

"Quite so, madam, but we have responsibilities. If you can refer me to your bank."

He offered her ten pounds for the Sheffield plate, and she demurred.

"It is worth more."

"We have to make a profit, madam. Well—I'll offer you eighteen guineas for the whole lot. The jewellery isn't much use to us, but if you care to meet us, well and good."

She stood reflecting, calculating, and trying not to feel ashamed. Why should she feel ashamed? Eighteen guineas. The sum might represent two cheap frocks, new underclothing, a new trunk, shoes. This Mrs. Pym was a woman of the world, and if Mary Summerhays' pride was growing old and thin, Elsie's pride was young and sensitive.

"Very well—I agree. Perhaps you would like to ring up the manager of my bank. He knows me very well. Mrs. Summerhays of 7, Spellwood Terrace, Chelsea."

She gave the bank's address, and was left standing while the

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shopman put through the call. The response was satisfactory, and he came back to complete the business. He paid her the money in three five-pound notes, three pound notes, and the surplus in silver. She had to sign a receipt. She closed her suit-case, put on her gloves, and walked out of the shop. No one opened the door for her.

She walked all the way to Chelsea, and let herself in, and then realizing that Elsie had returned, she managed to smuggle the suit-case into the kitchen. Elsie was packing. She had three sugar-boxes arranged in the dining-room, and into these boxes she was stowing some of the superfluities of the house, for her mother would need very little that was personal in a Pulteney Street bed-sitting-room. The furniture was going to be stored.

"Where have you been, Mumsie?"

"Oh, just for a walk."

Elsie had her sleeves rolled up, and her hair needed waving.

"I've decided to take the typewriter. It's a portable. May I?"

Mrs. Summerhays sat down on the sofa.

"Of course."

"I'm going on trying very hard at short stories. I ought to have some time to myself."

Mary Summerhays was wondering why Elsie had been just a little reticent about Mrs. Pym, though Mrs. Pym had behaved with consideration in allowing Elsie these free days. The child Sylvia had gone to her godmother's for a week, and Mrs. Pym's world seemed to be a *de luxe* affair—Paris, Rome, and everything first class.

Mrs. Summerhays made a remark.

☞ "You ought to get your hair waved, dear."

"Yes—I know."

"I should like you to have a few new things to take with you."

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Mrs. Pym won't want you permanently black. Besides, it's rather pagan."

Elsie sat back on her heels

"Yes—but—"

That negative word had loomed for years over the Summerhays' household because of Mr. Jordan's very positive publicity. Mrs. Summerhays seemed to dream for a moment, and then her eyes lit up. They had beauty behind her daughter's back.

"I have a little money put by. We'll do some shopping this afternoon. You can't travel with a woman like Mrs. Pym—. I mean—I'd like you to have some pretties—"

Elsie got up and kissed her mother.

"I'm going to earn some money. Perhaps the shoe will be on the other foot—you dear."

They went to Harris & Lord's in Oxford Street. Messrs. Harris & Lord were universal providers, an establishment that gave you a great deal of exercise for your money, and if you walked a mile to buy a packet of pins, you could cover a second mile to procure a bottle of bath-salts. Departments had multiplied to match feminine complexities. There were hundreds of glass cases, and hundreds of sophisticated young saleswomen in black, whose coiffures were as elaborate as the organization. Masses of colour, masses of material, acres of glass and polished floor, perfumes, millions of stockings for the million, hats crowded like confectionery or hats solitary and select on little wooden pedestals.

Mrs. Mary was a wise woman.

"Frocks first. Doesn't do to choose a frock when you're tired."

Frocks lived on the second floor. The Summerhays were shot up in an elevator to a sort of miniature Hall of the Mirrors, and the young gentlewoman who waited upon them had jocund brown eyes and a pleasant smile. For some inscrutable reason she was

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not bored. She consented to the showing and selling of frocks with an air of cheerfulness.

"Something not too expensive."

The girl and Elsie looked at each other, and a little smile passed between them. The door of a glass case was opened; it was the four guinea case, and it was the girl who selected the frocks. She knew much better than Elsie did what Elsie ought to wear.

She persuaded mother and daughter to decide on a pongee silk and a taffeta, an amber and a blue green variant, and Mary had to side with the saleswoman, for Elsie was persuadable by anything pink. But a modern frock is a mere handful of tissue, and Messrs. Harris & Lord's myriad glass cases symbolized the complexities of a feminine culture. If you purchased a dozen frocks, a nice discrimination would insist upon a dozen etceteras to match the frocks.

Eight guineas subtracted from eighteen! Mrs. Mary had two or three pound notes in reserve, and when they descended to underclothing it had to be of the plainest. Utility. And Elsie was one of those serious and innocent persons who assumed that no other creature would ever be interested in her underclothing or her nighties. They prepared no blush for the hypothetical bridegroom.

"Will it wear?"

Then she needed a hat, and a perfunctory lady tried to sell her one of those Amazonian helmets, a hard black casque, but here Elsie the sentimentalist rebelled.

"No, I'd like something a little softer."

They bought two pairs of shoes, day and evening, and the evening shoes would go with either frock. A cheap, fibre travelling trunk completed the outfit, and Mrs. Summerhays had one pound, eleven and sevenpence left in her purse. But she had en-

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joyed herself, and so had Elsie. Paris and Rome and Mrs. Pym should not be made to stare, for when Elsie was dressed up she was quite a comely creature.

"You must have your hair waved, my dear."

"Yes, I know."

II

There were so many things that Henry Vane had not seen—the new Wimbledon, the new Regent Street, the Cenotaph, Mr. Lansbury's Lido, the Motor Show. Regent Street and the Cenotaph were at his service any day of the week, festooned and wreathed with the innumerable red buses. In theory, Vane should have accumulated years of frustrated curiosity, a hunger for sensation, but London was so very full of sensation that it tired his senses. It was like looking at a kaleidoscope, or sharing in a perpetual motion show, and he was alone in it, alone with the traffic and the crowds.

At the rush hour he would see the crowd storming buses and pouring into tubes. The ant-heap swarmed. It was stirred up by the stick of Necessity, or he supposed so, and yet when he considered the crowd's purpose he was bewildered. Whence, and why and whither? What was the tendency? Was there a tendency? What would the world be like a hundred years hence? And did it matter? Did anything matter? There were occasions when he became conscious of fear. He was an electron, a swarm of particles bombarding the walls of a glass tube. No escape. He would be attacked by a feeling of dreadful futility.

He went to the Motor Show at Olympia, and under a vast glass roof that was like a London sky—rather dirty and obscure, he shared the stuffiness and the carbonic acid with thousands of other people. There were crowds of cars and crowds around the

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cars. People jostled him. The place seemed to swarm with large and formidable women who were as technical and more critical than the males. He saw large, red-faced men sitting experimentally and successfully in sumptuous saloons.

Certainly, it was a wonderful show, but, like much of the new world, there was too much of it. It bewildered him. If he stopped to look at a particular car a dozen other people seemed to collect round him like flies to share the sugar. Many of the showmen looked tired and bored, and one to whom he spoke smelt aggressively of beer.

Some of the cars struck him as being beautiful in both line and colour, especially the Isottas and a Rolls, and it occurred to him that if he wished it he could possess such a car. But what would he do with it? Tour Europe alone in a seven-seater like a mechanical Wandering Jew?

He began to feel very tired. He wanted to sit down by himself away from all these people. Everybody was talking the same talk, and breathing the same air. Why not sit in one of the cars and pretend that he was a serious purchaser? He found himself standing by a car that attracted him, a Daimler fitted with a Connaught body, a beautiful blue thing suggesting sumptuous, sweeping speed, and he spoke to the showman in charge of the stand.

"How much do you want for this?"

The sum named surprised him.

"Can I try the seats?"

"Certainly, sir."

The showman unlocked a door. He explained that they had to keep the doors locked, or Tom, Dick and Harry and the girls who corresponded would crowd in, and take the bloom off the upholstery. "Just to see what it feels like, you know." Vane got in

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and sat down, and the gentleman in charge was accosted by a commissionaire.

"Excuse me—just a moment, sir."

He shut the door on Vane, and Vane—surrendering himself to that soft, sofa-like seat, felt that he had escaped into a kind of crystal case padded with silk. Yes, luxurious things were of some account. Protection, a pleasant aloofness, escape from a world and a show that were overcrowded. And suddenly, he was aware of a face at a window, a familiar face, Stuart Blagden's face. It smiled at him; the lips moved.

"Hallo—Harry! Funny coincidence. Buying a car?"

Vane leant forward and opened the door.

"Well, as a matter of fact I got in here to sit down. I'm supposed to be interested."

Blagden entered and sat down beside him.

"I say, this really is a rather lovely thing. I'm here looking for a birthday present. My wife wants a little town runabout. No, something about a third the price of this."

He fingered the upholstery.

"By Jove, one does get tempted. Why don't you fall, Harry? You can afford it."

Vane's eyes were half closed.

"All for myself? You want somebody else—"

Blagden glanced at him.

"Yes, that's so. One can't swank solus."

The showman in charge of this particular exhibit found two gentlemen where he had left one, and he proceeded to demonstrate to both of them the virtues and the beauties of the car. Apparently she was one of those unique creatures who inspire passion while remaining chaste, and though Blagden and Vane agreed with all that the gentleman said, they found that it was easier to get

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into the car than out of it. The salesman was a pleasant person, boyish and enthusiastic, and Vane began to feel that he was sitting there under false pretences. Blagden was far less sensitive. After all, it was the fellow's business to show off the car, and you did not commit yourself to anything by sitting in it and listening to an oration.

They escaped, and Vane accepted a trade-card, and said something about looking at other cars before making a decision.

"What about some tea, Harry?"

It was an inspiration.

"I'm not going to look at any more cars until I've had some tea and a cigarette. You get flustered into buying the wrong thing."

They found a refreshment-room, and Blagden—who was fastidious—sat down as though he mistrusted the chair. Even at Olympia the contrasts of life were so flagrant.

"Sitting in an Isotta or a Rolls and then coming down to chipped china!"

Vane looked very tired. He allowed Blagden to pour out the tea.

"Why don't you buy a car, Harry?"

Vane picked a lump of sugar from the communal bowl.

"Not much use to me. I'm thinking of going abroad."

He glanced almost apologetically at Blagden.

"I suppose I could go abroad? Travel—I mean. I did not understand about passports. I went to Cook's, and they gave me a form to fill up. One has to be certified—as a fit and proper person—"


He stirred his tea, and to Blagden he looked strangely forlorn.

"Oh—I dare say it can be managed. I know Horn at the Foreign Office. Would you like me to take it up?"

"Would you?"

"Of course."

CHAPTER SIX



ELSIE had finished her packing, and two red labels were attached to the green fibre trunk, for someone had told her that two labels were safer when travelling abroad. The portable typewriter shared the interior of a suit-case with a small collection of books, some of which were to be used in the education of Miss Sylvia Pym. The suit-case also had its two labels, and on these two red tabs Mary Summerhays had printed her daughter's name and address: "E. M. Summerhays. Hotel Continental. Paris."

Elsie stood at the window and looked at the oblong strip of ground that was separated from two other such strips by yellow brick walls stained almost black by the sooty atmosphere. She saw a small lawn surrounded by a gravel path, and two narrow borders full of the sword-shaped leaves of *Iris Germanica*, and at the end of the garden an old pear tree whose leaves were the colour of wine.

The last day in the old home.

She remembered the picture and its title, the flimsy fool of the family holding up his glass of red wine to the light, the bright eyes of the boy, the tragic and helpless faces of the two women. Men

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were carrying out furniture, and to-morrow men would be carrying the furniture out of No. 7, Spellwood Terrace. She was going to join Mrs. Pym at Victoria Station; and her mother would be left alone in a Pulteney Street bed-sitting-room.

Elsie realized that this strip of garden had been intimately hers, and as familiar as a picture at which one ceases to look with any conscious appreciation of its details, but on this October day it became for her strangely and definitely real. In looking at it for the last time she seemed to see it afresh; the thin grass, the sooty soil, the leaves of the tree like wine, both amber and red. A robin was singing, and its little scattering of song sounded chilly and plaintive. All this was ceasing. She was going away with Mrs. Pym, and Mrs. Pym puzzled her not a little.

Adventure? But was it not right that she should feel sad, and that her emotions should be as vividly coloured as the leaves of the pear tree? Hers was to be a bright, new world, Italy and sunlight, while over the London window of her mother's world curtains seemed to be closing. The Fulham Road all dingy and grey, November fog, drizzle, slimy pavements, a little walk to hire a twopenny novel from a circulating library, boiled eggs, coal carefully extracted from a lodging-house scuttle. She was conscious of a thickness in her throat. Her mother was a pathetic figure, a little faded shape moving in a kind of shabby twilight. She felt suddenly very tender towards this other woman.

For a moment her mood was one of self-accusation. Ought she to go? Surely youth could be very selfish! And then she heard her mother's voice calling to her from below.

"Elsie. Tea."

She closed the bedroom door and went downstairs. Her mother was seated at the table, and in the act of pouring out tea, and to Elsie's eyes her mother's figure had a strangeness, just as the

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familiar garden had seemed strange. A sudden thought assailed her. "Supposing anything should happen while I am away? Supposing—?" She sat down opposite her mother. Her mood was Cassandra's.

Six slices of bread and butter on a dish, the same old white dish with a blue border. A wedge of very yellow cake—grocer's cake. Her mother passed her her cup, and as she put out a hand to take it she was conscious of an inward tremor. The tremor spread to her fingers, and the teaspoon gave out a little metallic shiver in the saucer.

"Sorry."

But her hand was so unsteady that in setting the cup down she slopped some of the tea into the saucer. She felt ashamed of showing her emotion, and instantly she was questioning this shame. Was it that she felt things more acutely than other people, or was she less modern in her cult of the art of self-repression? She could not make a joke of life, or persuade herself to treat it as musical comedy.

Mrs. Mary's grey eyes had rested for a moment on the palsied cup. Yes, Elsie took life so seriously, and Mrs. Mary was reminded of the occasion when Elsie had gone away for the first time to a boarding-school with a tremulous lip and tragic eyes.

She said: "I'm glad you are taking the typewriter. I should keep on working at your stories."

Elsie passed her the bread and butter.

"I wish I wasn't going."

"But it's a great opportunity. I'm glad you are going."

She spoke with calmness, and her hand was much steadier than her daughter's, for she knew things that Elsie did not know, how age seems to muffle the sounds of life, and how the impact of emotion becomes less poignant. Some old people grow extraor-

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dinarily callous. You do not burn your fingers at the fire. A kind of gentle apathy descends, and you call it resignation.

Elsie was eating bread and butter as though she had a train to catch.

"It seems so unfair."

"What, my dear?"

"That I should be going to all these lovely places. I wouldn't mind so much if you—"

Mrs. Summerhays spoke gently.

"There is something you don't realize. I'm glad for you to go. I'd much rather you went than I did. I don't think that I should want to go. I'm too old to be moved, dear. Some of us don't transplant well after sixty. You mustn't worry about me."

Elsie's glance was poignant.

"But Pulteney Street!"

She saw her mother smile, and she wondered at it. Her mother had always been an adept at keeping up appearances.

"I shall fit quite well into Pulteney Street. Don't think yourself into me. I'll tell you a secret. There comes a time when one likes to sit in a chair and look out of a window. One doesn't ask for adventure. One—potters. One's content with quite silly little things."

Elsie cut the cake.

"Mumsie, you're pretending."

"I'm not. Pulteney Street is just far enough for me, but it's not far enough for you. Or—it shouldn't be. As for this little old house, well—"

She became silent, and if her silence was both enigmatic and eloquent, it had a tranquil, autumn stealth.

"You'll understand—some day. Or perhaps you won't. It will all depend— Yes, I think I'll have some cake. Though—that's

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another point—one hasn't the same appetite for cake."

She ended on a note of gaiety.

"You'll be back in the spring. We shall see the tulips out in the park. One ought to be able to enjoy looking at things without being too sentimental about them."

Elsie stared at her teacup.

"I think I must be sentimental. It's quite out of fashion, too. I don't bustle and stride. I don't play any games, or only a little very bad tennis. Yes, probably—being on my own will do me good."

Mrs. Summerhays cut her cake into neat little cubes.

"Stand up to the Pym woman. Don't be too generous with yourself. One has to learn to say no."

"But, mumsie, you've always—"

"Yes, perhaps, but your father never quite grew up. He was made that way. Life isn't so simple as sewing on buttons, and some people's buttons never stay put."

II

Mrs. Summerhays did not go to the station. She saw Elsie and her luggage into the taxi which drew up in front of the green motor van into which men wearing aprons and bowler hats were packing the Summerhays' possessions. She carried a bright and courageous face, and when they kissed each other her lips were colder and less tremulous than her daughter's.

"You have plenty of time. It will quite amuse me—watching the men. Send me a card from Paris."

She closed the door, and as the cab drew out from the kerb Mrs. Mary had a momentary glimpse of Elsie's face, and it reminded her of the face of Elsie the child. She stood for a moment watching the taxi and then turned to the green iron gate and mounted the

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three steps for which neither she nor Elsie would be responsible any longer. She was glad of that. Also, she was glad that the parting was over, for though at sixty you might not feel things so acutely, there was a finality about them, and the bones of your soul grew brittle.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

The doorway was occluded by a large person to whose posterior was attached a chest of drawers, and Mrs. Summerhays retreated down the steps and stood aside to let the procession pass. She was reminded of a somewhat similar procession, poor Jordan being carried out shut up in an oak box, and unable to exhibit himself on that last social occasion. Her pale lips pressed themselves together. She looked up and down the street as though compelling herself to accept its emptiness. She noticed that a blind in the house opposite had been carelessly pulled up and left awry. She went up the three steps and into a house that was full of an unfriendly and revolutionary disorder. A bowler hat with a dent in it hung on the knob of the terminal post of the banisters. The knob was completely concealed, like the head of a small child extinguished by such monstrous headgear.

III

Elsie used her handkerchief, but before the taxi had reached the Pimlico Road she had put the crumpled thing away.

At twenty-eight one should transcend tears and cambric, but her emotions—like her face—were quite without artifice, and at least some powder was needed in the Pym world. She opened a bag and dabbed herself, and with mildness accused the inward Elsie of being a silly ass. The taxi hooted its way over the Ebury Street cross-roads, and Victoria Station and the new world loomed very near. She had been instructed to arrive punctually at ten—

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thirty, as she would be expected to deal with the Pym luggage. Mrs. Pym loathed loitering in draughty and tumultuous vestibules while luggage was being registered. "Hen-runs, my dear." Railway termini were quite barbarous, even though a woman wore furs.

Elsie was ten minutes ahead of time. A porter removed her luggage and she paid the taximan.

"One trunk to be registered, miss?"

"Yes, Paris. But I'm travelling with—friends. Can you wait a moment?"

He glanced at her with cynical cheerfulness.

"I lose tips if I lose time, miss, but you'll find me in there."

She followed the barrow, and his somehow sulky legs, and looked about anxiously for the Pym party, but as yet she was not wise as to the procrastinations of Mrs. Pym. She would flash upon the scene five minutes before the train departed and, going straight to her seat, leave all the discomforts and agitations to some other person.

Elsie stood on the pavement and waited, and a succession of private cars and taxis arrived, depositing people and their luggage, and Elsie was continually moving herself out of the way of porters and their barrows. At ten-forty two taxis pulled in with Mrs. Pym, Sylvia and Miss Sybil Gasson. The second taxi contained nothing but luggage.

Some contretemps appeared to have annoyed Mrs. Pym. She was wearing a closely-fitting black chapeau that concealed her brassy hair. The child looked sulky. Miss Gasson had the cool and detached air of a woman who could keep other people's moods at a distance.

Mrs. Pym dropped her bag.

"Oh, damn!"

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Elsie picked it up for her, an Elsie who was rather pitifully eager to propitiate these strange women. Mrs. Pym did not thank her; she opened the bag and took out a green case that held the tickets.

"See to the luggage, will you? How many trunks, Sybil? Seven? Here are the tickets. Register to Paris. Wait—I shall want the Pullman seats. Yes, you'll find us on the train."

Elsie took the tickets, and became aware of the child looking up at her with a curious and concentrated stare, and it occurred to her at that moment that Mrs. Pym and her daughter were very much alike.

"Got any money on you?"

"Yes."

"Well, settle and let me know."

They disappeared, leaving Elsie to deal with all that mountain of luggage. She had to pay the two taxi drivers, and she had just enough silver to do it with, and she was feeling agitated, her reception by the Pym party had been so casual and unfriendly. She found herself with two porters and two barrows, while her own luggage waited to be collected. She hurried in with the men to have the luggage weighed.

"All together, miss?"

"Yes, all together, please."

Her own green trunk looked very flimsy and obscure, like a poor relation being introduced to all that prosperous baggage. Elsie was given a piece of white paper and told to go to one of the little windows. She was flurried. She dropped the tickets, and apologised to the face of the clerk, who took the white paper from her and began to make entries and calculations.

"Four pounds seven and three pence."

Elsie's lower lip quivered.

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"Four pounds—!"

She fumbled in her bag. She had not so much money on her, and suddenly she became a creature of panic.

"I haven't four pounds. I'll go and find my friends. You see—they left me to pay. I have time—haven't I?"

The clerk was laconic.

"Plenty of time."

One of the three porters, an elderly fellow who had been waiting behind her, seeing her agitated face took her in charge.

"That's all right, miss. Come along with me. Yes, take the tickets."

She wanted to run, but the veteran's phlegm restrained her.

"Which car, miss?"

"I don't know."

"We'll find it."

Mrs. Pym was busy with her mirror when Elsie dashed in.

"Oh—I'm so sorry. I find I haven't enough money. It comes to rather a lot."

Miss Gasson glanced ironically over the top of a picture paper. She appeared amused, but Mrs. Pym was not in a mood to see humour in anything.

"Good lord! How much do you want?"

"Four pounds."

Mrs. Pym found a five-pound note.

"Will that do? Yes. Hurry up. We don't want the luggage left behind. You had better leave me the tickets."

"But I may want the tickets."

"Oh, all right. Be quick."

A still more agitated Elsie raced back with the deliberate porter to the registered luggage office, and Mrs. Pym returned to her mirror and her own private disharmonies. Yesterday a fool of a

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coiffeur had made what she described as "a bird's nest" of her head.

"Silly fool! Why didn't she ask me for money?"

Miss Gasson lit a cigarette.

"Oh, probably she's gone abroad before with a suit-case and a hold-all."

"Where's that kid?"

Sally was exploring the car and its occupants. Her mother called to her.

"Come and sit down."

But Sally continued her explorations.

In five minutes Elsie was back with the porters and the hand luggage. She looked moist and apologetic, and her hat seemed to have slipped back. It showed too much forehead, a worried and responsible forehead.

"I'm afraid I haven't tipped the porters yet. The taxis took all my silver, and the clerk at the office—"

Mrs. Pym reached for her bag.

"Is that so! How many small pieces should there be, Syb?"

"Six of ours."

"The porters are putting them at the end of the car."

"Count them. Wait—I want one case here. A brown case with a red label. Got my initials on it."

Elsie picked up the three half-crowns that Mrs. Pym's rather clawlike fingers had placed on the table.

"I'll fetch the case."

She went, and Mrs. Pym lit a cigarette.

"The girl's a regular hen."

Miss Gasson looked darkly amused.

"Yes, she gets rather flurried. What about a little drink? I'll ring for the lad."

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IV

Elsie's mental picture of this first stage of the journey was full of confusion, like a puzzle that has had its pieces disarranged by some clumsy act of interference. Impressions interpenetrated and overlaid each other, and lay incongruously tilted. She was aware of the suburbs sliding by, interminable back yards with occasional splodges of colour, yellow houses, red houses, washing hanging out to dry. Yellow chrysanthemums in a garden, a row of Lombardy poplars glimmering gold, a broken and spacious sky.

She had the child opposite her, and she understood that she had become responsible for Miss Pym, to the relief of those other women who sat *vis-à-vis* behind her. She was conscious of having made a fool of herself, and that under no circumstances did those other women make public fools of themselves. Their clothes, so casual and so smart, were proof against criticism. That broadtail coat of Mrs. Pym's must have cost two hundred guineas. She had found a pencil and a notebook and was trying to put on paper the financial aspects of all that flurry. How much had she paid the taxi-drivers? Two-and-six each or three-and-six each? She was aware of a preternaturally solemn Sylvia scrutinizing her over the top of a picture paper.

The child spoke.

"Your hat's crooked."

Oh, probably. She smiled. She could not explain to the child that in her agitation she had bent down to grab an attaché case just as a porter had been moved to perform the same act, and her hat and his cap had come in contact. Absurd incident. She smiled disarmingly at the child, and put a hand to her hat.

"How's that?"

"You've got such a big forehead. Do you know an awful lot?"

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"Perhaps."

"I don't want to have a big forehead."

Open country, a man in a white coat coming to lay the table. Was she taking lunch? She glanced over a shoulder and met Miss Gasson's eyes, and Miss Gasson nodded at her. Sylvia lolled and made sheep's eyes at the man in the white coat, and scrutinized the wine list with an air of conscious precocity. "Mother will have a whisky. You see." Yes, mother and Miss Gasson drank whisky, Elsie and the child drank water, and Sylvia still watched the attendant, but as though she was waiting for him to drop something. How splendid if the dish of meat slid into somebody's lap!

Open country, green fields, woods, farms, but Elsie was becoming more and more conscious of the child opposite her. She felt that she and Miss Pym ought to enter into conversation, and Sylvia was behaving as an ominously goody-goody child, for occasional goody-goodness could be a joke. You played it upon unsuspecting people just as you caressed the cat before giving the animal's tail a tweak.

Elsie's eyes rested on a high beechwood all ablaze. Her face softened. She smiled; she addressed Sally.

"Look at the beautiful trees, Sylvia."

Sylvia, with her very red mouth full of chop, glanced at the wood as it sailed by.

"What are those trees, Sylvia?"

"Don't know."

"Beech trees."

The child laughed and showed too much open mouth.

"Pebble trees."

She stared at Miss Summerhays as though she had divined the sensitive fool in Elsie, and to Elsie the child's eyes suddenly suggested pebbles, hard blue pebbles, baffling crystals.

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At Dover the sea was calm, grey silk watered with pale sunlight, and anxious faces were reassured. It was to be a day without qualms. Mrs. Pym and Miss Gasson had a private cabin reserved for them, but Elsie and the child were to sit in one of those little cushioned alcoves with glass windows, that is to say if Sally chose to sit anywhere. Mrs. Pym called Elsie into the cabin.

"We had better settle up about the luggage? All right, take it out of this. Have you any French money?"

"No."

"That's not very useful, is it? I want you to look after all the details. Here's another fiver. You can get it changed on board. And keep an account. I suppose your French is all right?"

"Oh—I think so."

"As a matter of fact, there's not much jabbering to do, but I don't want to be bothered."

Meanwhile there had been a trifling altercation in the gangway between Sally and Miss Gasson, for Sylvia had asserted that she was not going to remain in a stuffy old cabin; she was going to see the engines, and Miss Gasson had held Sally firmly by the wrist. "No you don't, my dear. You wait for Miss Summerhays." And Sally waited, for Miss Gasson—casual and calm and supercilious—somehow managed to control that little piece of proud flesh. She handed Sally over to Miss Summerhays, but Elsie lacked Miss Gasson's grip.

Sally bolted, and the steamer was under way before Elsie cornered Miss Pym behind one of the boats on the upper deck. She appealed to Sally. "Now let's say good-bye to Dover. We shan't see it again for months and months—you know." She insisted on holding the child's hand, and Sally played the goody-goody game for five minutes, and they stood by one of the white rails and watched England diminish under that northern sky. Elsie was

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thinking of other things, and there was a little thickness in her throat.

Sally, intrigued, watched her governess's face. It had a funny, shimmering look, just as though Miss Summerhays was going to blub, and Elsie came out of her dream to hear the child asking her a question.

"Are you going to be sick?"

Elsie's lower lip quivered.

"I don't think so. Why?"

"You had such a funny face. Last time I saw lots of people sick. They did look silly."

Calais. An assault by blue-bloused porters with metal badges, shouting and hustling, Sally insisting on carrying her own yellow landing-ticket and delivering it to the official at the gangway, and then the solid and sumptuous coaches of the Flèche d'Or. Mrs. Pym, in a new and golden temper, sleeked herself like a cat into her chair.

"Good to be out of all that dog-fight. Can't think, my dear, why the idiots don't pay the extra and travel decently."

Miss Gasson, with an alert dark glance at male figures entering, crossed her legs.

"Because they haven't got it. No grouse here. We should be crowded out if they had."

And suddenly Miss Gasson smiled, and Mrs. Pym, understanding the significance of that smile, turned a brassy head and became vivid and vivacious. Two well-dressed, well-fed men were moving to the seats on the other side of the gangway. They were seats reserved for Elsie and the child, but readjustment was in the air. Mrs. Pym and her friend had been parading on the boat—hence acquaintances.

"Hallo—"

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"All merry and bright."

"There you are. My governess and the kid can swap with you. Where were yours?"

"Next coach. All in order?"

"Absolutely."

So Elsie, returning from checking the hand-luggage and tipping the porters, found herself relegated with Sylvia to another coach. She was not sorry. She wanted to try her French on the attendants and her powers of persuasion on the child. She was realizing Sally as something new and strange and ominous.

Sally jiggled up and down on her chair.

"Mother's got a man."

Elsie looked shocked.

"You mustn't say things like that."

"Shall—if I want to. Besides, it's true."

Elsie retreated upon dignity and silence. She thought that a period of shocked aloofness might produce some effect upon Miss Pym. She sat and looked out of the window and watched the grey and red of Calais change to those open, rolling fields. France, the English Pale, the Field of the Cloth of Gold, Henry and Francis, Mary with her broken heart. She sat and thought of that other Mary, and then she felt herself kicked.

"Sylvia!"

"What?"

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"You know very well."

"I just jiggled. Don't you ever get the jumps?"

"People are looking at you."

"Well, they can."

A kind of hostile, watchful silence settled. More rolling fields,

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an interminable landscape, a vast quarry, horses ploughing in a field, a sky that was grey and blue. Then—tea, and Sally watching the preparations with a kind of inward stare as though some project was maturing behind those pebble blue eyes. Elsie, still putting faith in silence and hauteur, poured out Sally's tea and her own, and hid her disapproval behind a book. Sally had rolled a piece of newspaper into a tube, and was slowly and surely thrusting the end of it across the table.

Elsie jumped. A clatter, something hot in her lap, the contents of her teacup.

"Sylvia!"

The child's face gloated.

"Didn't you feel the train bump?"

Elsie looked at her. She had surprised the paper tube in the process of withdrawal. The act had been deliberate, and yet—for a moment—she could not believe it.

"Sylvia—how dare you do such a thing? My dress—!"

"I didn't do it. The train bumped."

Elsie was fumbling for a handkerchief. A disapproving voice from the other side of the coach suggested that little girls shouldn't tell lies.

CHAPTER SEVEN



VANE left England in November.

It was a raw, grey day, and as he looked back on those diminishing cliffs he remembered that on the last occasion when he had seen them they had been very white in the sunlight, but that was long ago. They had been the cliffs of an illusion, and now on this November afternoon they suggested a vast expanse of dirty linen badly washed and hung up to dry. Dover the dreary. And since he was an indifferent sailor and the sea was rough, he went and lay down in the gentlemen's saloon on a hard and shiny red couch with a hard and shiny red squab under his head. He was very much alone, and liking it. During those fifteen years of seclusion he had evolved an interior life of his own, and within him a grey-headed quietist walked to and fro with eyes downcast.

Someone was being sick.

He lay and listened unsympathetically to the other fellow's qualms. It was a base and beastly performance but somehow human, and suddenly the sound linked itself to a memory. He remembered young Tallis being sick with funk at Loos and lying on his belly half in and half out of a shell-hole. Loos, that vast,

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experimental and bloody muddle. Yes, it was after Loos, and after the kind of bitter rage that it had bred in him, that he had come home on leave and found his wife pregnant with Belgrave's baby. And he had shot Belgrave, and he had enjoyed the shooting of Belgrave. Another bloody muddle.

He closed his eyes.

He wanted to get away from things, away from humanity, and especially from humanity that made moist and ugly noises. He was quite alone, and his desire was to be alone in some place where the sun shone, and where nothing that was English mattered. A Wandering Jew. The phrase had stuck in his consciousness, and he played with it, and perhaps posed to it. He would go where he pleased and do what he pleased, and with a kind of dispassionate curiosity observe life and reflect upon it. He felt drawn towards old dead things, for dead things were silent. They waited for you to come and sit by them in silence, and when they spoke it was to the imagination. There was no vortex in history into which you could be sucked.

For he knew that he was afraid of life, and he feared it for so many reasons, and partly because he was obsessed by the thought that life—raw life—could give him nothing. He shrank from the red meat of it. He had a strange feeling of being half naked in the thick of a crowd, just as in one of those fantastic dreams when a man's dream-self is discovered at a dinner-party in pyjamas. He did not belong. He had not the animal urge in him that could make him plunge a second time into the illusion of living. He was forty-six years old, grey at the temples, and beginning to stoop. He was shy of people, shy of traffic, shy of so many things, and the new world was not shy.

At Calais he heard French spoken for the first time after some fifteen years, and as for the landing arrangements, they dated from

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Noah. There was the same sheep-like herding, with French porters pushing through the crowd, the same congestion at the gangway, while the ship—like a sausage machine—extruded all this jostling humanity. Suit-cases and hand-bags—as of old—bumped the backs of legs. There was the same historic fool who had failed to grasp the uses of a landing-ticket, and who had put it away in an overcoat pocket, and who fumbled and blocked the gangway.

Vane tried his French on the porter. As a youngster he had been fairly fluent.

"Yes, the Golden Arrow. Things do not seem to have changed very much. That silly business of getting people off the boat."

The porter had a jocund eye.

"And people are still sea-sick, monsieur."

"It is a long time since I have travelled this way. Why don't they use broader gangways?"

"Perhaps, monsieur, because people are still so much like sheep, and sheep have to be controlled."

Yes, it was the same old Calais, draughty and grey and cold, and though he had not been sick, Vane had experienced chilly qualms. The porter found him his seat, and with a weather-worn smile over the tip, bustled off in the hope of picking up a second perquisite. Vane sat down and absorbed the warmth and the newness of the big Pullman car. Yes, this train was different, with its fauteuils and polished wood and its spaciousness. A plate of hot soup would have been acceptable, but when he stopped a white-coated attendant and made inquiries, he found that it was *déjeuner* or nothing. He asked for a whisky and soda, and was told that it should be procured when the business of settling the travelers in their seats had been attended to.

The car was very hot, and he got out and walked up and down the platform, and when he returned to the coach he found him-

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self in the presence of his *vis-à-vis*. It was young and French and feminine, and of so exquisite and vivid a texture that almost he felt shy of placing himself opposite it, and slipped into his seat with self-effacing stealth. Obviously, the rough sea passage had not impaired the creature's bloom. It had covered the table with various properties, and when Vane sat down it smiled at him and politely withdrew some of its possessions.

"Pardon, monsieur."

He felt vaguely disturbed. Was he going to travel all the way to Paris in such propinquity? But he need not have worried, for the creature's poise was as exquisite as her loveliness, and the very perfection of her person was like a screen of glass. She never appeared to look at him again after that one polite smile. She read a book, she took tea, she attended to her complexion, though such culture was like powdering the lily.

But the very perfection of her somehow fascinated Vane. Only the French product could have so mingled artifice and nature, and yet she did not impress herself upon him as woman. She was a flower shop, confectionery, perfume, a bunch of lilies, silk, and both cool and luscious. Her eyes were like brown grapes, though he could not say that he had ever seen a grape that was brown. Her mouth and skin were the perfection of sensuousness.

She had a peculiar effect on him. She was both real and not quite real. He could not rationalize the idea of clasping and kissing such a creature. Incredible, impossible! Would anyone dare? And yet he supposed that some passionately audacious youth would both dare and be welcomed. Exquisite embraces—! And suddenly he realized how matters stood. His reaction to her was that of a shy and sensitive boy or that of an old man from whom the urgencies of sex have passed. She symbolized life, youth, the sun at the zenith, and he was afraid of life; he could only sit and watch.

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Something had withered in him. He had dried up, and he was conscious of a feeling of self-depreciation, a subtle self-mistrust. He could look but not touch. The very exquisite aroma of life drifted to him and evoked a peculiar fastidiousness, a sensitive shrinking. He seemed to be sitting in front of a fire whose glow did not penetrate and warm his vitals.

Yes, that was it. Differences, gaps, the faint feeling of inferiority that youth can instil into middle age, and to elude the challenge middle age tries to look fatherly. An interlude of fifteen years. Did appetite atrophy? Or was it that the secret self stood in grey fear of some tragic and futile recrudescence, cold—self-consciously cold and mum? Absurd and grizzled wings trying to flutter like youth's to the candle?

He sat and looked out of the window and watched the dusk furl up the French landscape and put it away. The human window opposite him, with its fruit and its flowers, seemed to grow dim, and when the lights of Paris showed he was aware of a curious feeling of consent. He did not look at the girl again. All that was finished.

Vane had had a room reserved for him at the Imperial, and he had chosen this particular hotel because Blagden had told him that it was large and anonymous and cosmopolitan. Moreover, it was not his intention to stay in Paris more than three days. He dined in the restaurant and allowed himself half a bottle of *Nuit St. George*, and he began the meal with oysters. Afterwards he went and sat on the sofa in the kind of glazed peristyle that surrounds the courtyard of the Imperial. He wanted to smoke a pipe, for he was getting back to a pipe, something at which you could bite and pull. A cigar was too soft and sensual. But would he dare to light a pipe in the Imperial? He did dare. His sofa stood with its back to the glass in a narrow and less frequented part of the broad

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corridor. Writing-tables and chairs were ranged opposite him along the wall.

He smoked and meditated. No one interfered with him, and almost he forgot that he was in Paris. He was a man on a sofa feeling rather sleepy, and pulling hard at his pipe. A smart person in a little black hat came and seated herself at the writing-table exactly opposite him. She was restless, alert, a little surreptitious. She lit a cigarette, and between her scribbles kept glancing at Vane.

He remained unaware of her and of her sexual significance, and the silent invitation went astray. She saw him yawn, and her very red lips moulded themselves to a word that should have been *Bête*. She tore up a sheet of paper, threw the fragments almost contemptuously into the waste-paper drum, rose, and whisked herself off.

Vane yawned again. He was feeling sleepy and tired. He decided to go to bed, for the one really friendly conception in the world was a comfortable bed. It accepted you, gave you warmth and protection. You relaxed, fell asleep, forgot.

II

Elsie locked her bedroom door.

Her room was on the fourth floor of the Hotel Elyseo, and when she looked out of the narrow french window she saw the iron grille of a little balcony and beyond it—Rome. She gave a shake of the head as though she had just unfastened some fillet that confined her hair, for this was her one free hour of the day when Sylvia was left with Mrs. Pym in the suite on the second floor, and Elsie could unfasten the buckles of her patience and be herself. She went and stood at the window. The afternoon sun had reached it, and as she stood there her face grew soft and smooth, and her

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forehead lost a little pucker of effort. How blessed to be alone!

One leaf of the window hung open and she stepped out on to the balcony into the full sunlight. Over there were the green tops of the stone pines in the Borghese gardens, and below her loomed the old red brickwork of the Aurelian wall. There were other balconies dotted along the façade of the Hotel Elyseo, but she was not conscious of them, or of the rooms to which they were attached. Her neighbours were more or less secret people deposited in pigeon-holes, though the Italian woman next her would hang out minor specimens of linen to dry on the rail of the iron grille.

But when she had sunned herself for two minutes she stepped back into the room which was little more than a passage joining door to window, and full of wooden bed and wardrobe and toilet cabinet. The walls of the room had been colour-washed a bright pink, and Elsie did not object to the colour. She needed a rosy flush at the back of this new life which was replete with Mrs. Pym's brassy head and the blue eyes of Sylvia. There was a very small table in the room, and it would just fit between the bed and the toilet cabinet, and Elsie arranged her chair and table facing this window, and took an exercise book from the drawer. She sat down. She opened the book, and read through the last two paragraphs of the short story she was writing.

She had got herself bogged in the middle of that story. It had developed a glutinous and somewhat sentimental subjectivity to which Elsie's imagination adhered like a fly. She could not make the thing move. Her characters mooned about in an atmosphere of introspective melancholy. She sat and frowned over those two paragraphs, and groped for some dramatic event that might rescue her little people from their slough of inaction.

Supposing she involved "Jack" in a motor accident on the road to Tivoli? But motor smashes were so usual. She sat and bit her

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pencil and stared at the top of the trees in the Borghese gardens. Yes, they were just like green clouds, and her Roman tale got lost in them, and the core of her consciousness became Elsie. She knew why she was sitting at a table at this window, and why she was trying to produce an article that might possess some commercial value. She had completed her third week with Mrs. Pym and Sally, and she had experienced days of bewilderment, anger, self-accusation, terror. How strange and horrible that a child should be able to make her afraid!

She had remained awake at night feeling frightened. She had reasoned with herself. "You—must—get control. Go on being patient and kind. She'll change. Perhaps she'll get fond of you. Even little animals get fond of people. You—can't—give up. It would be too weak and futile. Besides—you can't afford to give up."

Yes, that was it. She was involved in the moods and appetites of other people. She was a sort of human accessory, an accumulator charged with vicarious whims and tempers, but not allowed to discharge herself. She was supposed to look sweet and to accept. And she had not realized—That really horrible child! What—was—the matter with Sally? But suddenly she pulled herself together. She must not let herself think. She removed her elbows from the table, and with a tense forehead set herself to concentrate upon the blank page.

Jack should have his motor-smash, and Irene should arrive at the right emotional moment. What did it matter? Escape was the necessity, some open window—no matter how obvious and narrow. She pressed her pencil between finger and thumb, and began to write. The words came. They seemed to fall like drops squeezed from her own secret horror of the little, sensual, scolding world in which she found herself involved.

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There were footsteps in the corridor, and a sudden hammering at her door. She was startled. She sat rigid in her chair.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"Me."

That child! Of course! She made herself speak casually.

"What do you want, Sylvia?"

"I want to go out."

"We are going out after tea. You know that you are supposed—"

"Mother's gone downstairs. Expect old Allybaster's called. What are you doing in there?"

The handle was rattled.

"I'm resting. I'm going to rest till four o'clock. Now go away, Sylvia, and read your book."

"It's a silly book. Mother told me to come up here."

Elsie sat very still.

"I'm resting. We'll go out after tea."

A kick was administered to the door, and then Sally could be heard rushing away down the corridor. Thank heaven! Elsie ran a hand over her hair, and attempted to return to the affairs of "Jack and Irene." She read over the last few lines, and was shocked by their egregious futility; she ran a pencil through them, and biting at the selfsame pencil, groped for unravelled ends. Now—what did happen exactly when a motor-car struck a telegraph pole?

She was confronting her own inexperience in such matters when the footsteps returned. Two small fists beat a rub-a-dub on her door.

"Miss Summerhays, I've been downstairs."

"Sylvia, I told you—"

"Mother's sitting on a sofa with ol' Allybaster. He's got his eye-glass in. He's just like a tom-cat."

Elsie pushed back her chair. She was aware of herself standing

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in the middle of that small room, and that she was shaking. She was conscious of making a wild effort to control herself.

"Sylvia, go to your room at once, and stay there."

The door was given a final kick.

"I'll spill the soup over you at dinner, you see."

"Go to your room at once."

"Boo! Why don't you get a man, old Summerhays? Cos—your hair grows all wrong," and then she vanished.

III

It was part of the innocence of Elsie that she should have asked herself that question—"What is the matter with Sylvia?" for people who are both sensitive and short of money may have to refrain from asking such questions. Before accepting this situation Elsie had not demanded references from Mrs. Pym as to Mrs. Pym's moral status and temper, nor had she asked that she should be supplied with a report on Sylvia's character. The impertinence of any such piece of self-protecting curiosity would have been obvious and final.

Probably, Elsie had never heard of sadism, nor would she have associated such emotional obliquity with a child. She knew nothing about the heritage of Pym, or that Sylvia's father had not been able to prohibit in himself certain craves that make a man socially discordant. She was equally ignorant of the cheap tissue that had been used in the make-up of Diana Pym, or that Mrs. Pym's mother had suffered from lack of inhibition and an imaginary thirst. Mrs. Pym herself had indulged in a screaming and congested childhood. What she had wanted—that she would have, and at the age of fifteen she had wanted one thing so fiercely and unrestrainedly that the shocked and alarmed "Head" of a very notable

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school for young gentlewomen had sent Miss Diana home in a hurry.

Hence—Sally and all the implications that were contained in Sally, who, true to her heritage, had been expelled discreetly from a preparatory school for pouring paraffin over a pet enemy and attempting to set the other child alight. Hence, also, Elsie's two predecessors, both vanquished by this little sadist, one in three weeks, the other in three months. Hence, a certain liberality on the part of Mrs. Pym, who, having to consummate her adventures with this piece of human dynamite attached to her, was ready to be accommodating to the woman who was paid to relieve her of a part of the problem.

Mrs. Pym would pay for what was worth while, and after one very distracting fracas in Paris she had been quite nice and explanatory to Elsie.

"Yes, that's always been our trouble, Sally's temper. I'm just a bit light-tempered myself. Sally and I explode each other, and that's just it. I shouldn't lose my temper with the kid, but I do. I know she wants a firm hand, Miss Summerhays, and a kind one. I think you are just the sort of woman to manage her. You're calm and serious."

She had taken Elsie out to visit the *Galleries Lafayette* and had bought Elsie two new frocks.

"Just you keep cool with her. Don't let her get you riled. Yes—I know, I look a bit absurd in a pulpit. By the way, when would you like your money?"

Elsie had been touched by the presentation of those two frocks. Probably, Mrs. Pym wasn't a bad sort of woman, a little over-smart and meretricious, but not without generosity, and Elsie, in her innocence, had responded to the gesture.

"Oh—I only want a little ready money by me. I think I'd like

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to let my salary accumulate, and then I can ask you, can't I?"

"Of course. You can have a cheque."

"That will suit me admirably. You see, my mother wasn't left very well off, and I—want to help."

Mrs. Pym had reported the successful issue to Miss Sybil Gasson.

"Oh, yes, the two frocks did it. I wonder that damned kid hasn't cost me three mink coats. I really think she'll manage to get some sort of control. She's so dashed serious about it."

Miss Gasson, whose views upon life were both sybaritic and sardonic, replied that the seriously-minded people were so essential to the fabric of society.

"The importance of being Ernest, my dear."

But Mrs. Pym had never heard of the play. She liked her drama farcical and well frocked, something that screamed and waggled legs.

"Yes, high brow and all that. What are we going to do to-night? What about the Folies Bergère?"

But Miss Gasson had not been feeling like the Folies Bergère. That sort of stuff could be so very like cheap pottery.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



*H*AD Elsie been asked to define her concept of "A bad sort of woman" she might have understood the perplexities of some learned judge attentively listening to the technicalities of an expert on mental disease. In the modern parlance the problem was not one of ethics; it was completely and properly pathological.

An insufficiency of cells in the supra-granular layer of the cortex cerebri. Yes, something of the sort, and those rampant and inferior neurons splurging with weakly inhibited instincts, the greeds of the flesh; but Elsie had lived a somewhat sheltered life and things that were crudely elemental bewildered her. Instinctively she shrank from them, not because she was a prude, nor because of a thin and sterile niceness, but because of the texture of her temperament. And she would shrink without understanding the why and the wherefore, vaguely and defensively repelled, while thinking it her duty to overcome this repulsion. As a child she had suffered from strange, secret loathings. Fat meat had provoked in her a shrinking nausea, and she could never be persuaded to enter a butcher's shop. She could remember being scolded by a stalwart,

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meat-faced maid who had taken her out shopping. "Don't be so silly, Miss Elsie. What's there to be so squeamish about?" And Elsie, with dark, round eyes fascinated by a bloody sheep's head, had pleaded, "Oh, let me go out, Ellen. I can hear the dead things talking."

Always, her hands had reached out to beauty, though beauty may defy definition, and even when her hands had been very small they had caressed a rose or the perfect plumage of a bird. She had been a very tender-hearted child, easily touched, quick in her penitence or her compassion, and since a sensitiveness to beautiful things demands delicacy of fibre, there was in Elsie tissue that could be easily wounded. She bruised where tougher skins would have reacted like rubber. She would dress up coarser natures in silk and be shocked and puzzled when they behaved to her in sackcloth. Like many serious and rather bookish creatures, with a passion for beauty, she had blind spots in her mental retina. She could be egregiously innocent. Her reaction to the red end of the spectrum was incomplete. She was more tuned to the blues and the violets.

She was strangely innocent in her appreciation of Mrs. Pym, and also of Miss Sybil Gasson. She supposed that they were women of the world, wealthy, smart, rather sophisticated. She was inclined to dress people up like dolls, and once having dressed them to assume that they were what she supposed them to be. She had no proper realization of the difference between live flesh and sawdust. She had evolved certain conceptions such as "woman"—"child"—"man," and when the raw flesh that was Sally began to contradict her conception of what a child was or should be, she was distressed and bewildered.

Meanwhile, Mr. Allabaster sat on a sofa in a corner of the lounge of the Hotel Elysee, and was playfully amorous towards

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Mrs. Pym. He stood six feet one inch, and had a waist, and yet all of him was smoothly rotund, his face, the full brown eyes in their large orbits, the monocle, the head, the voice. His black hair might have been painted on his scalp like the hair of one of those old-fashioned Dutch dolls. He was mellifluous, waxy, slightly sententious, a well-preserved man of five-and-fifty, who cultivated gastronomy and his phrases.

"Precisely so, dear lady, life is pot pourri, a mélange."

He made little dabs at Mrs. Pym's person, patting her rather like an old black cat playing with a live coal, and to Sylvia peeping through the curtains of the lounge he was just like the cat in "Alice in Wonderland." Or real Cheshire. And somehow his name was so apposite, alabaster, a waxy surface sacred to some ritual.

Mrs. Pym was animated.

"Oh, yes, the kid's upstairs with Miss Summerhays. No, I don't think I ought to—really."

"Not really! Shall I argue the point?"

She touched his knee with the tip of a first finger.

"I never argue."

"Quite superfluous. Obviously. You vanquish."

"Don't be absurd!"

Mr. Allabaster became veritable Cheshire.

"Dear lady, I am never absurd."

The unsuspected child put out her tongue at him. Things like Mr. Allabaster suddenly arrived like a ghostly grin. Men were always arriving and departing from the precincts of Mrs. Pym, men of all sizes, ages and possibilities, and Sally could not say whence Mr. Allabaster had adventured. One day he had been non-existent, and the next he was there, nor did Rome know any more about Allabaster than Sally did. He was one of those well preserved

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and slightly enigmatic persons who float about Europe, and are equally endemic in Rome, Paris, Vienna or Monte Carlo. He might be abroad for his health, or even on business, or combining business with pleasure. He appeared to know everything that was to be known about wines and cigars. He could play a masterly hand at "bridge" or poker. He even gave you the impression that he could attend a mannequin parade, and discuss the frocks with the facility and fastidiousness of a fashion expert. He could talk intelligently about music, and precious stones and perfumes. He had technique. His phrases purred, and his Christian name was Montague, but to Sally he symbolized an old black, smirking tom-cat.

Her mother was dressed to go out, and when Mrs. Pym and Mr. Allabaster rose from the sofa, Sally left her observation post and scurried upstairs. A little black and white waiter was travelling along the corridor with a tea-tray, and he and Sally met outside the door of the suite. Patisserie! Sally grabbed a cake and laughed in the waiter's face. With her mouth full of cream and sugar she dashed up the stairs to the fourth floor, but before she could use her fists on Elsie's door the door opened.

"Tea—cakes."

Obviously! Sally's mouth was a cream bun, and as Elsie observed it she was moved to tell Sylvia that cakes should be consumed with a ceremony. But how was it that one was always saying "don't" to a child? It was so very exhausting, and according to Elsie's creed a gentle hint should have been sufficient. She ignored the incident. She took Sylvia by the hand.

"Let's go and have tea."

Sally allowed her hand to be held.

"Mother's gone out with old Monte."

"Monte?"

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"Yes, Mr. Allabaster. She's got her broadtail coat on."

Elsie felt that she ought to make the occasion appear social and correct.

"Probably—they have gone to see some pictures. Mr. Allabaster is very fond of pictures."

And Sally giggled. She gave Elsie an upward stare which said, "Pictures! How funny you are! Why, mother's the picture."

II

Sally disposed of three more cakes, and with Elsie refraining from emitting "dont's," a fallacious peace prevailed. Miss Summerhays had come downstairs wearing a hat, and when tea was over she sent Sally in search of headgear.

"We'll go out now. We will walk to the Pincio."

Sally was docile. She reappeared wearing a red beret on her flaxen head, and between that red button and her light blue pull-over her fleshly little face was curiously solemn. They passed through the Golden Gate and across the road into the Borghese gardens where the tops of the stone pines caught the sunlight. Rome was here, enjoying the same sunlight, old men and nursemaids and mothers sitting on chairs, and idle men leaning on the railings by the horse track. There were cavalry officers in dramatic blue cloaks, and Sally looked at the officers.

"Miss Gasson's got one like that."

Elsie refrained, for Sylvia was walking very decorously, and if Elsie desired anything in particular it was that this decorum should not be disturbed. The afternoon was so very beautiful, the grass vivid and refreshed, the tall trees sunning themselves. She looked across and up at the Villa Medici serenely set amidst black ilex against a sky that was beginning to colour. How very beautiful Rome was, both so brilliant and so softly blurred, the old and

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the new, youth and antiquity. She felt as though a cool hand had been passed gently over her face.

Sally addressed her, a Sally who was playing at being good.

"Miss Summerhays, why do people get married?"

Elsie looked very serious.

"Because they love each other, dear."

"And supposing—supposing they stop loving each other, do they get unmarried?"

"Sometimes."

"Why doesn't Miss Gasson get married? She's had lots and lots of men."

The conversation was becoming difficult, and Elsie made an effort to divert it into other channels.

"It's not our business, Sylvia. Miss Gasson may be hard to please. Look at that officer on the white horse."

Sally looked.

"I'd like to see old Monte on a horse. He'd go bump-bump, and his eyeglass would fall out."

• "Mr. Allabaster may be quite a good rider."

"I bet he isn't. And he walks like this."

Sally gave a rendering of Mr. Allabaster's particular method of progression, and then seeing three officers strolling towards them she became utterly demure. She met them with sweet decorousness, gazing up with naïve innocence into their faces.

"Did you see them look at me, Miss Summerhays?"

"Perhaps—because you are looking a good little girl?"

• "Do gentlemen like looking at good little girls?"

"Of course."

Metaphorically, Sally put out her tongue. And Elsie was feeling challenged. The vanity of the child! But of course most children were vain little creatures, and you had to allow them their candour.

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Besides, might it not be possible to use a child's vanity and turn it into what Elsie would have described as self-respect and nice behaviour? They strolled on up the long straight walk to the ilexes and statues of the Pincio, and suddenly the sky opened and Rome lay before them under the westering sun. They crossed to the terrace and stood there with the sunlight on their faces, and Elsie Summerhays seemed to hold her breath.

"Isn't it beautiful, Sylvia?"

Rome! Roofs all bronze and gold, the grey blue bubble of St. Peter's, other domes, the soul of a city shaped in stone, a sky that was growing gold above the heights of the Janiculum. Elsie stood and dreamed, while the child looked up inquisitively into her face. Beauty! Miss Summerhays was always mooning about beauty, and Sally would have said: "The world's got to look—at me, because I'm going to be beautiful." She scrambled up on to the balustrading, and craned her head over the wall, and Elsie's reaction was instant. She came out of her dream.

"Don't do that, Sylvia."

"Why?"

"You might fall over. And you'll dirty your pullover."

Sally kicked her toes against the stone and at her leisure slithered down.

"When I'm grown up I'm going to say 'don't' to everybody. But I shan't be paid to say it—like you. Why isn't the silly old band playing?"

"I don't know."

"Let's go and look at that funny fountain."

"I think it is time we turned back, Sylvia."

"I believe you're afraid of the fountain."

"Afraid! Why should I be?"

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III

An agency had reserved a room for Mr. Henry Vane on the fourth floor of the Hotel Elyseo, for he had requested them to recommend him an hotel that was not too large and not too English, and to put him nearer the sky than the street.

Arriving very late at night Vane found Rome sleeping, but a little restlessly so, for Mussolini's Romans seem never to sleep. Taxis and private cars made of the night a bowl of black glass that was shivered upon the pavement of progress. But Vane was tired and ready for bed.

In passing through the lounge he became aware of a very golden lady sitting on a black sofa, with a glass at her elbow, and a cigarette pendent from a flesh-coloured mouth. She stared at Vane; she appraised him; and he, supposing her to be something both up to date and very old, passed on unperceived to the lift. A polite and sleepy-eyed little clerk ascended with him to the fourth floor and introduced Vane to his room.

"It is rather small, sir, but you wished to be on the fourth floor."

"Yes, that's quite all right. This will do excellently."

His luggage was carried in by a vast and asthmatic Roman in an apron and striped vest, and Vane tipped him and locked the door, and, unpacking only the necessities, undressed and got into bed. He was tired, and the bed comfortable, and he slept in spite of unsilenced motor-cars and argumentative Latins.

He woke with a feeling of freshness. He slipped out of bed, and unfastening a shutter pushed it back to uncover a miraculous picture. The stealth of the dawn still glided in and out among the trees. He found himself looking over a length of the old Aurelian wall into the greenness of the Borghese gardens with their grassy spaces and towering trees. The sunlight was dispersing a thin

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white mist. It shone upon the tops of the stone pines, upon the cypresses and ilexes. Dim hills floated against a sky of blue vapour.

Vane stood and gazed. His lips moved.

"Wonderful!"

Yes, it was very wonderful, and for the first time since his liberation he was conscious of a little spasm of pain, a kind of vague yearning. It was like watching the birth of a world, something that was young and fresh and untarnished, and he had no wish to go back to his bed. He was in Rome, a pilgrim and a stranger, and Rome was eternal and timeless. He crossed the room and rang the bell, and returning to the window watched the sunlight on those Roman trees.

Someone knocked at his door.

"Hot water, please."

He had much French, but little Italian, and young Italy does not ask to be addressed in French. It can cope with American English.

"'Ot water. At once—sir."

The immediateness was relative, but Vane did get his hot water at the end of twenty minutes, and he ordered coffee. He was shaving when he became intimately and newly aware of his face as his own face. He had looked at it in a mirror each morning, but on this Roman morning he was moved to look at it differently. So—this was the face of the person called Henry Vane, the mask of that strange yet familiar thing—himself.

"I'm alive," he thought; "it ought to be good to be alive."

Petit déjeuner arrived, and the tray was placed on a table by the open window. He could smell hot coffee, and he felt hungry, and having finished shaving he sat down at the table and enjoyed the coffee and rolls, while beyond the Wall of Aurelius the sunlight grew stronger and the sky more blue. Somewhere below a man was singing, and Vane rose and looked out of the window to dis-

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cover the singer. Between the street and the old red wall a florist had his garden, and a gardener in patched blue trousers was carrying out pink and white azaleas and placing them in a row ready for transport to some shop. The man was singing, and Vane felt that he had every right to sing.

He sat down and finished up the butter and the coffee. Yes, they might have brought him more butter. He would speak to the waiter about it.

IV

Vane confessed to himself that he had thought of Rome as a city of the memorable dead, forgotten Popes and Cæsars, of palaces in ruins, of triumphal arches and broken marble columns. He had told himself that he would grow a beard in Rome and take to archæology and become a haunter of museums and galleries, for in the Rome of the ancients no one would trouble about a man's past. The Venus de Milo was in marble, and for all time, and in the Forum or upon the Palatine Hill no one would ask you for your passport. He could disappear in Rome, lose himself among old, dead, tragic things, be with Keats and Shelley, even wrap himself in the imagined red robe of a cardinal.

But on that first day he found Rome to be a living city, and aggressively so, and, like life, full of provoking contrasts. Live Romans possessed Rome, and the driver of a Fiat taxi was of more importance than a dead Cæsar. Young Rome was flamboyant and noisy, its sacred chariot the motor-car, and its god a youth in a black shirt.

Vane explored. With the innocence of ignorance he had supposed that there would be no crowds in Rome, but when he had experienced the narrow pavements of the Corso he was wiser. He

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could only suppose that the Rome of Trajan would have jostled you just as vigorously, and he escaped into a carriage and was driven to the Forum. He spent most of the morning in wandering about the Forum and on the Palatine Hill. The House of Livia and the great Cryptoproticus depressed him, for the sun was shining and he wanted to be out in the sunlight. Wandering about the garden of the Casino Farnese he reconsidered the whim that had brought him to Rome. It had occurred to him that he might settle in Rome, learn the language, establish himself in a little flat, and become a student of art and antiquities.

Yes, bury his past and live the life of an amateur professor pottering among pictures and statuary, becoming familiar with every ruin and every church, a student of numismatics, a connoisseur of Greek vases and of cameos. But was it possible? Could a live man confine himself to a dead city, with that vigorous young city singing as that fellow in the blue trousers had sung over his azaleas?

He wondered. He was still remembering the thrill of that perfect morning, and the sunlight exploring the shadows among the trees of the Borghese.

He lunched at the hotel, and had tea at the English teashop in the Piazza di Spagna. It was full of elderly women, and feeling that he had absorbed other antiquities he escaped, and climbed the Spanish Steps and turned towards the ilexes of the Villa Medici. He walked up to the Pincio, and watched the sunset. He looked over Rome, and as the dusk spread and the lights appeared he heard Rome, the new Rome.

It astonished him, for the city lying below him sounded like a zoo gone mad, full of frightened, trampling and trumpeting beasts. Or it suggested an immense playground where thousands of very vigorous children were blowing tin trumpets, and he

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realized it as a chaos of hooting cars, a din that was somehow both horrible and ridiculous.

He passed back under the massive gloom of the ilexes, and found his way to the Hotel Elyseo. He went up in the lift to the fourth floor, and locked himself in his room, and opening the shutters saw the darkness of the Borghese gardens like a cloud with distant lights spangled above it. He sat down at the window with the room in darkness.

Yes, it was much more peaceful here. And suddenly he heard a child screaming, tearing a raw young rage to tatters, and in this old city he understood that life was as elemental as ever.

CHAPTER NINE



WHEN a man walks into an hotel dining-room and sits by himself at a little table in the corner he may be challenging observation, and Vane was observed, and to Mrs. Pym he appeared as a rather interesting person, a gentleman and well tailored. With a wink and a faint flick of the head she gave Miss Gasson to understand that there was something to be studied, and Miss Gasson glanced over her shoulder. The *maitre d'hôtel* was standing by Vane's table while the new client consulted the wine list.

"Legal, my dear?"

"I should say army."

"Quite a nice dinner-jacket."

And Mrs. Pym with her inflated nostrils and her blue and expectant stare tried to catch Vane's eyes, but without success. He was just a man who dined and did it expeditiously and got up and walked across the yellow carpet of the white dining-room as though none of its occupants could concern him. In the lounge he sat for ten minutes in one of the deep, plum-coloured chairs whose padded arms were protected by lace mats that were for ever getting disarranged. He was obviously aloof and not expecting to

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be addressed. Even when Mrs. Pym passed by and dropped her yellow bag he made no attempt to pick it up for her.

The Hotel Elyseo was very full, and during the first evening meal Vane observed his fellow diners. Always he was expecting to be confronted with some familiar face, but all the faces in the room were strange. Mostly it was a Continental crowd, and the few English and Americans were women and elderly. A middle-aged son dined brightly and like a noble fellow with a decrepit mother and aunt. On his right Vane had an Italian family that talked like a public meeting out of control and hotly argumentative. There were two young things seeing Rome with a conscientious father who brought Baedeker to the table and went to bed with him. A fat and swarthy Frenchman displayed to the world the amplitude of a mate blatant with *bijouterie*.

On the second evening Vane could not help noticing the two women who shared a table by one of the white pillars. They were there to be noticed, and within range and ready for an exchange of glances. They came in late to all meals. They were very smart women who ordered special dishes and were a source of anxiety to the *maître d'hôtel*. One of them, she of the yellow head, had a trick of snapping her fingers when she wanted to attract the attention of a waiter.

Vane saw her as a thin, brassy, restless little woman with an unfinished red mouth, and a nose whose nostrils were wide and undercut. She threw those blue-eyed glances about the room, and was always fidgeting and posturing and touching things on the table with affected little gestures. That she was excessively vain was obvious. It was a type that both attracted and repelled him, but the attraction might survive for one hectic and sensual week-end and leave with cold disdain on a Monday morning. Her companion was less crudely physical, more of the Mona Lisa. Nor did it occur

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to Vane that these women might contrive to be in his vicinity and select his corner of the lounge, though during those first meals in the white dining-room with the yellow carpet he was always meeting the blue eyes of Mrs. Pym.

She had marked him down, and she would have been equally promiscuous had the world been full of Mr. Allabasters. Here was an unattached man with a Savile Row cut to his clothes, a man who looked interesting and who should be able to dance. Mrs. Pym was an incorrigible collector of experiences.

She talked for effect.

"Oh, my dear, that new Venus at the Diocletian is simply—marvellous."

Miss Gasson did not play up as she might have done. She knew that her friend was not exactly a museum piece, but a collector of partners who could raise a banner at the "Excelsior."

"A bit cold, I think."

"But not last night. Your little *capitano*—"

Miss Gasson snubbed her.

"Rather too monkeyish, my dear; too much shimmy-shimmy."

Vane had spoken to no one in the hotel, but such aloofness could not be considered exceptional in an Englishman. He was elusive. After lunch he went to his room and lay on his bed, and read, and after dinner he disappeared upstairs to a book, his pipe and an arm-chair.

On the fourth floor of the Elyseo there were some thirty doors, and occasionally Vane met some other visitor in the passage, but to him all those doors were like shutters closed over other lives. On the third afternoon, however, just when he was feeling drowsy he was disturbed by a child's voice.

"Miss Summerhays, old Summerhays. I know you're in there."

The voice seemed to saw at the silence like a blunt knife.

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"Why don't you answer? I'll make a row till you do."

There was a drumming on the neighbouring door, persistent and vigorous, and reinforced by an occasional kick, and Vane, who was finding Rome sufficiently noisy without this performance, got up and opened his own door. He found himself in the presence of a small girl, who struck him as being a particularly unpleasant-looking child, and somehow resembling the brassy-headed lady of the dining-room.

He said: "You mustn't make all that noise."

Sally surveyed him, and then with deliberation put out her tongue.

"Shall—if I want to."

Vane felt posed. Obviously it would have been satisfying to apply the flat of a hand to some part of the child's person, but he lacked the authority. One did not chastise strange children in foreign hotels.

He tried sarcasm.

"If some little girls have no manners—"

"You—can't do anything to me. Boo!"

She gave a last kick to the door, looked up defiantly into Vane's face, and walked backwards down the passage.

"You try—perhaps she'll let you in."

Vane reclosed his door, feeling quite sure that he had had the worst of the encounter. But what a particularly unpleasant child, an absolutely evil child! And who was the unfortunate and responsible person whose door she had been assaulting? He walked to the window, and for the first time he realized that he was the possessor of a balcony, a very small balcony with an iron grille painted white. Now why hadn't he noticed that before? It was possible to put a chair out there and sit in the sun.

He stepped out on to the balcony and became suddenly aware

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of other balconies. One jutted out from the white façade within two yards of his, and, what was more, the balcony had an occupant, a girl. She was leaning on the rail and looking across into the Borghese gardens, and she appeared to be quite unconscious of his appearance upon the scene.

He looked at her, and looked away, and looked again.

Her profile was vaguely familiar. Where had he seen her before? It could not have been before—? No, she was much too young for that. And then she seemed to become aware of his presence. She turned her head sharply and a little resentfully, and her eyes met his.

He remembered. She was the girl who had sat with her mother on one of those green seats in Hyde Park, the girl to whom he had taken off his hat and explained— But how extraordinary! And then he was observing the swing of a disappearing skirt. She had vanished through her window.

Again he stood posed. He had been struck by the expression of her eyes, a kind of bewilderment. Had she recognized him and felt the same surprise? But no, he could say that he had come by that impression before she had realized his presence. She had been leaning upon the rail as though straining to escape from something, from some secret fear.

Then he realized that it was her door upon which that most unpleasant child had been beating a tattoo. Miss Summerhays! Well, what was the significance of it all?

II

Next day he came to understand a part of the significance. He was lunching early, and before the official hour, as he had arranged for a car to take him to Tivoli, and in the empty dining-room he found Elsie Summerhays and the child. They were

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sharing a table in a corner by the door, and as Vane passed by the child recognized him and said something to her governess.

Vane did not quite catch the remark, but it sounded impolite, and he heard Miss Summerhays' "Sssh!" and when he sat down and looked in the direction of their table Miss Summerhays' head was bent and her face obscure. He had the impression that she was in a hurry to get the meal over, that she was in a state of agitation, and not wanting to be looked at.

The child kept twisting round in her chair and staring at him, and once the little red dart of a tongue protruded.

"Sylvia, get on with your meal, dear."

"The meat's horrid."

"No, it isn't. It is quite good meat."

A waiter brought Vane his soup. It was rather too hot, and he was passing his spoon through it when his attention was attracted to the table in the corner.

"Sylvia—!"

The girl was wiping some stain from her face with a serviette, and the child flourished a spoon. Vane saw Miss Summerhays rise, hesitate, and resume her seat. Her face was hot and humiliated. She did not look in his direction, but appeared to steady herself and compel herself to go on with the meal. What had that damned child done—thrown food in her face? He began to spoon up his soup, and keep those two under tactful observation.

He heard the child's voice.

"You're blubbing."

Miss Summerhays appeared to blurt out a denial.

"Yes, you are. What a joke!"

Undoubtedly there was something wrong with Miss Summerhays' eyes, and though she kept them lowered they were foggy and blurred. She searched hurriedly for a handkerchief and blew

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her nose, and put the handkerchief away, and looked across half defiantly at Vane. But there was an element of pathos in her defiance. She looked rather shabby and ill, and her eyes were red and slightly swollen, and Vane felt hurt for her sake. Poor kid! But she was not so young; he judged her to be about thirty.

The glass doors opened. People were coming in to lunch, and the fourth person to enter was Mrs. Pym. Her blue gaze fixed Vane in his corner, and then she was bending over Sylvia, and applying her red mouth to the top of the flaxen head.

"How do, darling. Been good?"

She glanced at Elsie Summerhays, who had gone strangely white, and was folding up her serviette.

"Yes, quite good, Mrs. Pym. Now, Sylvia, the table will be wanted."

If Mrs. Pym noticed anything unusual about Miss Summerhays' eyes she did not remark upon it. With the consciousness of being watched by Vane, she tweaked her daughter's hair.

"Like to come out to tea, darling?"

Sally's smirk was cynical.

"With old Allabaster?"

Mrs. Pym frowned slightly.

"No. Don't try to be funny. We'll go and have tea at the Russian shop. Would you like to see a real live princess?"

Sally considered the bait.

"Does she look like a princess, or just like old Summerhays?"

Mrs. Pym made herself smile.

"You come and see. Party frock, party manners. And Miss Summerhays isn't old, and you're much too cheeky. Tut-tut."

She rapped gently with her knuckles on her daughter's head.

The girl and the child disappeared through the glass doors, and Mrs. Pym sat down at her table; she picked up the menu and gave

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it a cursory inspection. Ultimately her eyes looked at Vane over the top of the card as though she had a smile hanging ripe and ready to drop, but a waiter put himself in the way just as she caught Vane's eyes and the smile was beginning. The wretched fellow was trying to persuade Vane to take the entremet, but Vane asked for cheese, and then he changed his mind and would take neither, but got up and walked out past Mrs. Pym's table, and Mrs. Pym's incipient smile fell to the ground.

Vane was driven to Tivoli. The little hill towns stood out very clearly against a crystal sky, and the cypresses of the Villa d'Este never moved a finger. He wandered about the gardens and found them sad, and too full of the sound of running water, and he supposed that the mood of such a place should be experienced on some summer day when the Campagna was all glare and heat. Moreover, as he stood at the window of one of those painted rooms, he was not moved to recreate the flamboyant figures of dead prelates and princes, but to reflect upon those incidents of the Hotel Elyseo. His eyes and thoughts went back towards Rome.

He supposed that the girl had to function as a kind of human mattress interposed between the child and the mother. Ostensibly, a little predatory woman of the world could not be expected to be hampered in her adventures by a little predatory child. And what a child, and what a mother! A man's intuition did not need to be very sensitive in order to paint for him a picture of the promiscuousness and the greedy vanities of Mrs. Pym.

Pretty rotten for the girl.

But why didn't she chuck the job?

Perhaps her living depended on it. She couldn't afford to be independent.

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III

* Elsie was writing a letter, and that letter was to her mother, and the late afternoon sunlight flooded the little pink room and some of its pinkness coloured Elsie's letter. For it was characteristic of Elsie—this unwillingness to wound her mother or to worry her at a distance with complaints and questions. She did not cry—"No one suffers as I suffer," for her tendency was towards self-depreciation. She was more easily humiliated than angered, and her lack of success with Sylvia prompted serious self-accusation. "It's so futile to grouse and give up. I don't want to write to her and say I am a failure. I—simply—can't." So her letter to Mrs. Summerhays was chatty and affectionate, and said very little about the Pym, though she did confess that the child was rather spoilt and difficult, but the only thing to do was to be patient and firm.

Firmness. Yes, she was always trying to make herself appear firm and decisive and kind in the face of Sally's quite outrageous behaviour. She was beginning to realize the danger of showing any feeling when the child provoked her, for Sally's provocations were part of the young animal's playfulness.

But how humiliating it all was, how wearing to have to pretend to be that which you were not. She knew that she had made a dreadful fool of herself in the presence of that man whose face was vaguely familiar. To blub before Sally! How fatal and futile, but it should not happen again, oh—no, not again. Such a debacle betrayed that the child had carried your defences and trampled and exulted over the victory. "You're blubbing. What a joke!"

She finished her letter, and addressed and fastened up the envelope. She heard a door open and shut, but she attached no significance to the sound. Sally and Mrs. Pym might not be back till six, and this blessed interlude was precious. Should she try to

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work on her short story? The tale had got badly bogged, and she had been quite unable to extract it; she seemed incapable of concentrating, of visualizing impersonal things. She had no sense of security, and a part of her remained restless and alert, waiting for one of Sally's assaults upon her door.

No, she couldn't write to-day. The poor old typewriter had not uttered a click since its arrival in Rome. Her eyes lifted to the sunlight and the trees of the Borghese, and with a sudden feeling of tenderness towards those trees and all that beauty, she rose and, slipping past the table, stepped out on to the balcony. She could be quite alone here.

She stood rigid. Her next-door neighbour had also chosen to occupy his balcony; he was leaning on the rail and looking out over the Borghese. Well—really! It might have been somebody else, not that man who had seen her make such an exhibition of herself. She decided to withdraw.

But he had realized her presence. He had turned his head; he was looking at her with a kind of puzzled and oblique shyness.

"Excuse me, but haven't we met before?"

Her chin quivered.

"I don't remember."

"Weren't you sitting on a seat in Hyde Park one afternoon in October. Yes, with your—"

She remembered. She stood irresolute, looking at the trees.

"Yes, with my mother. And you—"

"I told you that your mother had walked in the direction—"

"Yes—I remember."


And then he surprised her. He drew back from the rail, and said something about the view being very wonderful, and that probably she found it restful. He seemed to become even more shy of her than she was of him. She got the impression of a personality

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that effaced itself and left her the solitude and the sunset. He drew back through his window.

She was standing there alone, and she had a sudden feeling of being grateful to him. He had presented her with the solitary solace of all that beauty, just as though he understood.

CHAPTER TEN



ELSIE's day was so very much Sally, and Mrs. Pym's day so very much Mrs. Pym's, that they were like the time-tables of rival railway companies who arrange that their respective services shall arrive and leave jointly-used junctions so that any connection between the two becomes either contemptuously inconvenient or impossible. A bath-room intervened between Mrs. Pym's room and her daughter's, and before her toilet had been attended to, Mrs. Pym was invisible and potentially peevish. Elsie was nurse-maid as well as governess, and Sally's knowledge of personal hygiene was as sketchy as her arithmetic, and her idea seemed to be to get up as quickly as possible and with as little attention to soap as her elders would allow. At half-past eight the *petit déjeuner* arrived in the sitting-room, but Mrs. Pym took hers in bed when the spirit moved her. She was seldom up before eleven.

Elsie was finding out all sorts of things about Sally, and as she began to ponder them she became less sensitive to the child's outbursts. Sally was strangely backward, and even in the matter of putting on her clothes, a little slut who cared for nothing but

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gaudy colours. She was a messy feeder; she would get her mouth all jam like some small child in a slatternly back street. She spilt things on the table and on herself, and was whimsical and petulant about food. She would gorge herself or appear suddenly and inexplicably fastidious.

At nine-fifteen they began lessons, and Elsie had soon discovered that Sally's mind was like a sieve. It seemed to let everything through save the few large and rather sensational facts. Her vocabulary was extraordinarily limited. She could spell only the simplest words, and often she would spell these differently, and quite fantastically. Her handwriting was crude and sprawling, and as for her arithmetic it had not progressed as far as long division, and even the multiplication table was a box of tricks.

Elsie had not heard of the phrase "High Grade Ament," but she began to wonder about Sally and about Sally's infantile yet socially precocious mind. The child was quite incapable of concentrating upon a subject, or of fixing her attention upon a point. She was just like a young animal ready to play with anything and everything and never with one thing for very long. She had known no discipline, and no real affection.

"Sally, nine times nine?"

"Don't know."

"You knew it yesterday, dear."

"Seventy-one."

Sally drew funny faces on a blank page of her exercise book. That was her one accomplishment, a certain facility with the pencil. She was a small caricaturist, and she could put people's funny features on paper: Mr. Allabaster's Cheshire-cat face with its eyeglass, her mother's splashed-in mouth, Miss Gasson's long nose. She had reproduced Elsie's rather serious forehead.

"Don't you want to know what nine times nine make?"

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No, Sally didn't want to know. Why should she? She was just a blob of blue-eyed inertia activated by the fidgets.

"Supposing you could jump nine feet and you jumped nine feet nine times, where would you be?"

Sally stared at her.

"In hell."

And Elsie had to laugh, though she tried to make her laughter good for Sally.

"You can't even find out. How would you find out? Let's have a jumping match. Let's write down nine nines and add them up. Quick!"

Sally responded, and with Elsie pretending to be slow, Sally contrived to get the addition completed first.

"Eighty-one."

"That's right. Splendid."

Elsie realized very soon that it was quite useless to keep the child sitting there for more than half an hour at a stretch. She took her out into the gardens with a book, and would attempt to give Sally doses of instruction on the homeopathic system. They counted trees, and spelt the names of objects, and attempted to translate the names into French. Meanwhile, Mrs. Pym dealt with her appearance, and became visible to the Roman world about eleven-fifteen. Usually, she strolled out with Sybil Gasson or Mr. Allabaster, and indulged in a tonic on the Corso. When she returned to the Hotel Elyseo, Miss Summerhays and Sally were having lunch, and Mrs. Pym might experience a moment of maternal playfulness.

"Well, darly-darly"—and sometimes Sally would mimic her mother.

After lunch—repose, or a reading lesson, and, if Mrs. Pym was not somewhere else, she had Sally with her from three till four,

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and Elsie was free. Then came tea and a walk which Elsie attempted to turn into a tour of instruction, but she found that Sally was interested only in the shops. The child had no one to play with, and on one occasion when she had attached herself to a family of Italian children on the Pincio the result had been disastrous, a fracas between Sally and an Italian small boy in which the boy had been badly worsted, and two large Italian women had become excited and voluble.

Elsie had had to do her best in limited Italian. She had tried a hurt hauteur with Sally.

"You are a horrid child. I shan't speak to you again to-night."

And actually Sally had blubbed, much to Elsie's astonishment.

"I'm not a horrid child, Summer."

"You are. You just show off and think it's funny. It isn't. It's just horrid and silly."

They dined at six-thirty, and Sally went to bed at eight, and her mother kissed her, and began the really serious business of the day. Fortunately the one thing that Sally excelled at was sleeping, and Elsie could go to her room and read. Usually she was too tired to exercise her literary ambitions, and often she would go to bed at half-past nine. An hotel in Rome is not a particularly noiseless place, and people banged doors and conversed, and cars rattled and hooted, and Elsie tried plugging her ears with cotton wool. Sometimes she did not get to sleep till midnight.

She endured, though the day buffeted her and the night was full of other people's discords. She endured because her serious soul assured her that she had to.

Yet, was it illusion or was she beginning to notice an almost imperceptible change in Sally, a slightly different attitude towards herself? The child was not quite so tormenting, for Elsie had worked out with knitted forehead one of the primitive inspirations

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of Sally. She had had one or two talks with Miss Sybil Gasson, who—worldling though she was—had a liking for Elsie.

“The kid’s an exhibitionist.”

“A what?”

“Well, she shows off. She knows that she has a reputation for being the worst child that ever was. She plays up to the sensation. She feels herself—it.”

Elsie pondered those remarks, and took them to heart. Obviously, the right reaction was to refuse to be impressed by Sally’s swashbuckling. The proper expression should be one of boredom, tolerant boredom. If she showed any feeling to Sally it should not betray irritation or amusement or pain. A kind of gentle, serene patience. But how difficult!

Why should she trouble? Would she have troubled if her living had not depended upon it, and if there had been no Mary Summerhays left with about fifty pounds a year? Yes, she supposed that she would, because her sensitive sincerity had to satisfy itself, and she was socially honest in her wish to give value for value. But sometimes, before going to bed she would stand on her balcony for five minutes, and look at the stars and the lights of Rome, and wonder. Why should one be so sensitive as to the character and the quality of one’s contribution to the social scheme while some other people were mere smart and cynical opportunists? And why should it matter when the astronomers lectured you about the stars and predicted for this earth and its creatures a frozen finality? Were not the opportunists wise in their generation, and the idealists mere simpletons? And yet she knew that she could not endure without her ideal, and that the scamping of her job would leave her restless and dissatisfied. She could only suppose that she was made that way.

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II

Vane's day differed from Elsie's. In appearances it was more placid and more self-ordered, for Vane had made the discovery that if a man has nothing definite to do it is immediately incumbent upon him to make himself do things. He had to create a routine to take the place of that routine which he had supported during fifteen frozen years, to plant a stake in the soil and lash himself to it, to refuse to sag and loaf.

He was taking Italian lessons from a little old English woman who had lived for some thirty years in Rome, and who twittered and made funny little grimaces. She ordered him to buy an Italian grammar, and allotted him a daily task, and he sat on a chair and was catechized like a small boy. He liked his old lady, for she had twinkling eyes and a brave and enduring cheerfulness. One of her hands was so crippled with rheumatoid arthritis that it held a book with difficulty, and Vane found himself drawing reflections from that hand.

He attacked Rome. He went resolutely to all the picture galleries and museums, and explored every quarter of that most enthralling of cities. He had seen the Vatican statuary three times, and visited the Baths of Diocletian twice. On three successive days he had spent a morning in the Forum, working with the map, but not blindly so, for he tried to create for himself a mental picture of that other Rome with its colour and its crowded life, its inspirations and its urges. He was making himself familiar with the history of Rome from the days of the Etruscan over-lordship to Garibaldi's defence of the city in 1849. Yes, that was a romantic and tragic adventure, and in the garden of the Villa Doria Pamphili he supposed that for a broken man like himself that desperate affair would have fitted him like a red shirt.

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But the new Rome was very much alive, and even if he was afraid of life he could not escape it. Rome put out its pots of pink and white azaleas and burst into song. There were the flower-sellers of the Spanish Steps, and the Roman children who played round the bandstand on the Pincio; Vane liked to join that crowd and watch these Roman children. They had such pleasant voices and they played so charmingly, nor did he ever witness a squabble. They struck him as being much gentler than the children of the north, the products of an older civilization, little, pale, dark-eyed creatures who made the raucous, yelling, red-faced northern child appear a little barbarian.

Yes, they were very different from the child of the Hotel Elyseo.

As for the lady with the brassy head, she had ceased to regard him as a possible victim, one more specimen to be added to the Allabaster world. Obviously, the man in the corner was a dull devil. He brought a book to lunch and to dinner, and became absorbed in it, and walked out of the room as though it was full of modiste's models. He had a farouche and distant air. He defied the provocations of an expectant eye.

But he had another meeting with Mrs. Pym's daughter. The child dashed into him at a turn of the stairs.

"Hallo, young lady, you seem in a hurry."

Sally was in a polite mood.

"Beg pardon. A gentleman has brought me some chocolates."

Vane smiled at her, for he had seen Mr. Allabaster in the lounge, and Mr. Allabaster had thought it politic to propitiate "that infernal kid."

"I suppose you are going to eat them all at once."

"I'll try," said Sally, and vanished below.

From that day each of them assumed that the introduction was permanent, and Sally christened Vane "Mr. Baedeker," and ex-

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plained him to Miss Summerhays as though Elsie was unaware of Mr. Vane's existence. Sally asserted that Mr. Vane went about with a red-covered book that was just the same colour as the cover of a hot-water bottle, and Sally suggested that he took the book to bed with him, and becoming mentally confused, used it as a hot-water bottle.

"He's got rather big feet. Have you noticed it?"

No, Miss Summerhays had not observed the largeness of "Mr. Baedeker's" feet.

III

However, in assuming that Miss Summerhays had remained unaware of Mr. Henry Vane's existence Sally was less precociously alert than usual, though it was Elsie's wish that Sally should continue in such ignorance.

For a very human little comedy was developing on the fourth floor of the Hotel Elyseo, though neither of the participants had divined its esoteric significance.

It was an affair of two balconies.

Elsie had taken to putting a chair through the open window, for this mild Roman winter invited you to sit out in a coat and scribble on a writing-pad. Her hour of peace and of solitude coincided with Mr. Henry Vane's mood of seclusion, and with equal innocence—to begin with—he was attracted by his own balcony. He too pushed a chair out through the window, only to find that he appeared to be trespassing on Elsie's privacy.

On the first afternoon he hurriedly withdrew his chair, and satisfied himself with a seat just inside the window, but apparently the girl next door was equally sensitive and self-effacing, for on the second afternoon there was no chair on Elsie's balcony.

Vane reflected. Had he driven the girl in? But perhaps she was

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not in her room this afternoon, and with some diffidence and caution he proceeded to pass his chair through the window. It was still in the air when he saw the legs of another chair appearing at that other window.

Hurriedly Vane withdrew.

On the third afternoon Elsie was definitely out, and Vane occupied his balcony, and was observed by Elsie from the Borghese Gardens.

She had begun to wonder about him. He seemed so very solitary, and shy and rather sad. She did not know his name. And he seemed to love his balcony just as she loved hers.

On the next occasion they peeped out simultaneously, met each other's eyes, looked startled and withdrew.

This Box and Cox business continued for a couple of days, and then—as though both the players arrived at the conclusion that the affair was growing a little ridiculous—both chairs appeared and remained. It had been raining in the morning, but the sky had cleared, and possibly other Roman augurs had been at work watching the flight of birds.

It was Vane who spoke. He was standing with one hand on the back of his chair.

"Really—I apologise. I can just as well sit inside."

She answered him rather breathlessly.

"Oh, please don't. Not on my account."

"Quite sure?"

"Absolutely."

"I won't disturb you."

They were as quiet as mutes. Elsie wrote a letter, balancing the pad on her knees, and Vane read a book. Apparently they had agreed to ignore each other, or to tolerate the neighbouring presence. They did not exchange any further remarks, and at five

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minutes to four Vane got up, put his chair inside and disappeared, and that was the beginning and the end of that particular day.

On subsequent occasions they became a little less formal, but their conversation continued to be impersonal and to imitate Mr. Hare's Walks in Rome. Had Elsie made the climb to San Pietro in Montorio? No, Elsie had not. She explained that her explorations were limited in extent. And where was San Pietro in Montorio?

"Oh, on the other side of the river. It's worth the climb."

"There's a view?"

"About the best in Rome. You can see Soracte, and Colonna on the Alban mountains, and the Abruzzi in the distance. You want a clear day, of course, and an afternoon light."

"I suppose you have been to Rome—often?"

"No. My first visit."

For the moment the conversation fell to pieces as though he had become self-conscious and fumbled it and let it drop. She noticed that he always retained his book, and that when the conversation tended to become personal he would retreat into the pages of his book. She had never met anyone who was so elusive and suddenly inarticulate. It puzzled her. It made him appear more interesting and mysterious. She sat and read or wrote a letter to her mother, and at the back of her mind she was wondering about him, just as he was wondering about her. And presently one of them would begin to feel that the silence was becoming a little gauche and unfriendly, and more desultory and naïve remarks would be exchanged.

"You see—I don't get much time."

No, she was shackled to that child, and as yet they had never touched upon the person or the temperament of Sylvia.

"Have you been to Tivoli?"

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"Not yet."

"Go on a sunny day. You want to see the light among the cypresses and on the water."

"Yes, the right atmosphere. Do you know that view in St. James's Park?"

"Which one is that?"

"Oh, if you stand at the Buckingham Palace end and look along the lake between the trees towards the Horse Guards and see all those grey buildings."

Vane had seen it, and the memory of it made him sad.

"Yes—I remember. Quite the most wonderful vista in London, to my mind."

She was alive to the sadness in his voice, and an indefinable something in his manner. Was it that beauty affected him as it affected her, filling her with strange yearnings, a gentle melancholy?

She said, "Yes, isn't it strange—that grass and trees and water and a few buildings should be arranged in a particular way—so that— Well, what I mean is—one is moved. But why? Like the Medici Villa over there, and the Golden Gate."

He glanced at the pages of his book.

"Yes, very queer. Some association—perhaps."

He became silent, for he had stood with another woman in that very place looking along that stretch of water in the very heart of London just before he had crossed for the first time to France. He had been in the presence of unknown perils, and had not foreseen them. He had been holding a woman's hand. Yes, sixteen or more years ago. He stared at the printed page without seeing it.

He was roused from his reverie by a movement of Elsie's chair. She was getting up. She stood for a moment looking at the trees before lifting her chair through the window.

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"Nearly four o'clock. I have to go on duty."

He rose, and stood awkwardly and self-consciously with his book in his hand.

"Lessons?"

"No, tea and a walk. She is rather backward. One has to go slowly."

She gave him a shy smile, and waited for a moment as though expecting him to say something. He looked at her obliquely and most strangely as though he was half afraid to look at her too closely.

"Yes, some children must be rather difficult, particularly—when—"

But he got no further. He hesitated, gave her a funny little nod, and sat down again in his chair, and Elsie disappeared through her window. He remained sitting there after she had gone, but he did not read his book, for he was contemplating Elsie as a creature with gentle and rather frightened eyes. He liked her seriousness and her hesitations and the way she held her head and looked at the trees of the Borghese with a little unrealized and tender smile. He had wanted to ask her questions, make her talk about herself, substitute the personal for the impersonal, for their conversation had resembled a French or Italian lesson in which master and pupil exchange linguistical banalities. But how impossible! He was cut off from all such intimacies. She did not even know his name, and he supposed that she might never know it.

The sun was setting and the air began to strike cold, and he was conscious of the chill and of a sudden feeling of intense loneliness. He got up and carried in his chair, and closing the shutters, turned on the lights.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



s. Pym was giving a party, and when Mrs. Pym gave a party she did not produce it either as an altruist or as a sensationalist. It might be a matter of diplomacy, of pleasing or provoking a particular person, or of advertising the financial stability of Mrs. Pym. Covers were laid for six, and the table had been specially decorated with flowers, but when Mrs. Pym's party entered the dining-room it consisted of five persons instead of six.

Vane, who had arrived at the ice-age, observed the gathering from his corner. It struck him that the hostess was a little shrill and over-animated, as though some contretemps had disturbed both her balance and her numbers. She was supported by Miss Gasson in black, and she had with her Mr. Montague Allabaster, whose white waistcoat and tie were too much in the superlative, and two Italian officers in uniform, one tall and one short.

Mrs. Pym snapped her fingers for the *maitre d'hôtel*. The table was a round one and some of its balance could be restored.

"Have that cover and chair removed."

She patted Mr. Allabaster's sleeve.

"Here, Monte, on my right."

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She had the shorter of the two Italians on her left—the other one belonged to Miss Gasson—and the party sat down and proceeded to produce that animation which can be so comforting to a hostess. They were going to dance at the Excelsior, and Mrs. Pym's turquoise blue frock was not the one she had proposed to wear. There had been a fracas upstairs, which explained the absence of the sixth member, for Sally on this special occasion was to have been allowed to sit up and dine in state, but Sally and her mother had had a difference of opinion and the child had rushed into one of her rages. Actually they had engaged in a scuffle, and Sally had rent her mother's new frock.

"You little beast! Put her to bed, Miss Summerhays. You had better change and come down and make up the party."

Elsie had demurred.

"Oh, don't argue, girl," and Mrs. Pym had extracted the turquoise dress from her wardrobe—"you can speak Italian. Damn it, I'm late as it is."

But Sally, clinging suddenly and surprisingly to Elsie, had still roared defiance.

"Summer shan't go. I want Summer here. She shan't go to your beastly party."

Mrs. Pym had had to compromise, for, after all, the child could not be left alone in one of those rages.

"Oh, all right, Miss Summerhays shall stay with you. I shall tell Mr. Allabaster how disgracefully you have behaved."

Sally had made a face at her mother.

"Oh, no, you won't. You'll stroke his silly old black head."

Therefore, it was not surprising that Mrs. Pym should be in a somewhat dishevelled and hectic mood, and that she should have hurriedly drunk two "side-cars" and touched up her mouth and powdered her temper. The party was for Mr. Allabaster, and the

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additional Italian had been intended as a foil, but not as so obvious a foil. He spoke some English, and as a gallant fellow who was about to drink Mrs. Pym's champagne, he appeared to think it his duty to uncork all his available English. Also, he was a wag, and his English bubbled, and was, unfortunately, of a sweet, cheap brand. He used his argot without experience and discretion.

He told Mrs. Pym that her dress took the cake, and sensing in Mr. Allabaster a waxy sulkiness, he tried to be easy and affable to that gentleman. He referred to Mr. Allabaster's monocle.

"Yes—I try to wear glass eye, but I not clever. So—distingué—a glass eye. You think it too, Mrs. Peem?"

Mr. Allabaster was not pleased. He helped himself to an olive, and wondered why Diana had collected this boot-black in uniform. Women were such damned fools about anything in a uniform, yet a woman of the world ought to know—He thought of asking the fellow whether an Italian cavalry officer was permitted to wear spectacles, and whether Mussolini was sufficiently clever to manage a monocle. Also, he detested triangular affairs, and in all probability this boot-black danced very well. Had Diana done it on purpose?

Even Vane as a casual observer got the impression that Mr. Allabaster was not pleased. He saw Mrs. Pym lay a finger on the edge of the gentleman's cuff.

"Give me an olive, Monte. Fingers."

But Mr. Allabaster passed her the dish.

Vane laid his napkin aside, rose, and walked out of the dining-room into the lounge. The lift was up above collecting clients, and so without waiting for the lift he began to climb the stairs. He had reached the foot of the second flight when he met adventure, Sally in a suit of blue and white pyjamas descending like a little fury with Miss Summerhays in pursuit.

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"Oh, stop her, please."

Vane spread his arms.

"Hallo, collared! What's this, an—?"

But his playfulness was countered. He suffered the unexpected, in that the child's fist caught him well and truly in the right eye. There was a kind of gasp from the pursuing Elsie.

"Sylvia—how dare you!"

Vane held the child gently with arms pinned, and her little red face blazed close to his.

"I—will—go. I want to see the soldiers. Yes—I'll go right down in my jammas. I will—I will."

She struggled, and twisted in Vane's arms and realizing that he was not going to release her, she spat deliberately in his face. There was a cry from Elsie—"Sylvia!" She caught her from behind, and with a violence that was both strange to the child and to herself she carried Sally up the stairs.

Vane heard the child cry out, "Summer, you're hurting me. Don't, don't."

"You deserve to be hurt."

But her anger passed as swiftly as it had risen, and Vane saw her look back at him over the rail.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry."

"Oh, that's all right."

She went up with a Sally who had ceased from struggling, a Sally who suddenly clung to her and blubbered. The child's face was almost touching hers, its little red rage soused in tears. She hated the child, and yet her hatred had an edge of pity, a kind of elemental urge to hold and to protect. And Sally was clinging to her.

"Don't be cross with me, Summer."

"How can I help it? Such a beastly thing to do!"

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The wet red face was pushed against hers. The child kissed her, and somehow Elsie felt both touched and revolted.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Sally. But—you—shouldn't hurt people. Will you ever understand?"

She was a little breathless when she reached the open door of the suite and carried the child in. Such emotional affairs were so very exhausting. She closed the door with her foot, and with Sally still clutching her, passed through the sitting-room to Sally's bedroom. The lights were on, and the bedclothes tossed back. She laid the child in the bed.

Sylvia clung to one of Elsie's hands.

"Don't go away, Summer."

"Are you sorry, Sally?"

"No, I'm not sorry, I'm not sorry, but don't go away, Summer."

Elsie sat down on the chair beside the bed. She was trying so hard to understand the workings of this little, elemental soul, for Sally had surprised her. There was something in Sally that would not confess to being sorry and yet was sorry, and was Sally so very unlike her less restrained elders?

"I'll stay a little while. Now try and stop crying, dear."

"I don't want to stop."

"Well, don't stop. Let it out."

And presently the wildness of Sally was appeased. She held on firmly to Elsie's hand, and just like some little animal she began to fall asleep. She could pass so quickly from one state to the other, and Elsie sat and wondered at the psychology of the child, for, after all, there were moments of appeal in Sally. Sudden anger—and sudden weariness, the red flesh flushing and then dimming itself in sleep.

Suddenly she bent over the child and kissed her forehead, and the suffused and sleepy face smiled.

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"I'm so tired, Summer."

"Well, go to sleep, dear. I'll stay here till you are asleep."
She did.

II

Elsie climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. She paused outside Vane's door and knocked, and even as she knocked she realized that she did not know his name.

"Yes."

So—he was in. Almost she wished that she had not knocked.

"Oh—I've come to apologize. I'm so sorry."

It seemed to her that his door opened with startling abruptness. He was standing there in his overcoat, with his hat in his hand. She drew back.

"Oh, that's all right! I was more surprised than hurt, you know."

"She's such an extraordinary child, so violent. Yes, I'll make her apologize to you to-morrow."

He seemed gently amused.

"Don't bother about that. Apologizing is rather a beastly business. I'll take it as said—by you."

She looked at him, and then at the pattern of the paper on the wall.

"It's very good of you. She's asleep now, yes, just as though nothing had happened. Isn't it amazing the way children throw things off?"

"Perhaps it's as well. But then—you take life so seriously."

"I?"

"Yes. You feel responsible."

"Yes, I do. But you were just going out. I mustn't waste your time."

He closed his door and stood with his back to the wall of the

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corridor, almost like a man standing rigidly to attention outside the door of his cell.

He said: "Oh, I'm just going out for a stroll. Rome's rather wonderful at night. I like to wander up to those ilexes outside the Villa Medici."

"I have never seen Rome at night."

"Why not come?"

She was startled, frightened, but how absurd! She wanted to go with him. He seemed so different from other people, so gently aloof from the fret and the fury of life. Somehow he made her feel secure, for—always—she was so much on the edge of things and at the mercy of the passions of the Pym world.

"Oh—I don't think I ought to."

He made a movement of consent, and hurriedly she qualified her refusal.

"But perhaps I might, just for half an hour. I'll look in and make sure that the child is asleep."

"It's very good of you. By the way, do you know my name?"

"No—I don't. Of course—I ought to—"

"Vane—Henry Vane."

He watched her face, but evidently the name was no more than a name to her. She smiled at him.

"Do you know mine?"

"Yes, the surname. And the rest?"

"Oh—Elsie. I'll go and put on a hat and coat."

"Supposing I wait for you in the vestibule?"

"Yes, I must just look at the child."

Vane went downstairs. The lounge was nearly empty, and Mrs. Pym and her party had passed on and up to the Excelsior, and he stood by the revolving glass doors and wondered whether her courage would fail her. She was one of those creatures with a

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vivid conscience, and she might find the child awake. He stood with his back to the lounge and the stairs, and suddenly she was beside him.

"Yes, it's all right."

He swung the door for her and followed her out, and they turned down the Via Porta Pinciana, he on the outside of the pavement, she close to the wall, and his feeling was that suddenly she had become frightened of her adventure. But he must not let her feel like that. He began to talk casually about Rome, and how Belisarius had repaired that old red wall of Aurelian, using the marble of half-ruined temples and palaces. His voice sounded quiet and easy. At the crossing where the yellow trams ground their way up hill they turned right along the Via Sistina, and so came to the Piazza of SS. Trinita de Monti.

Vane paused here by the parapet. They were looking down the Spanish steps into that chasm of light and shadow that was the Piazza di Spagna. A tram was passing across it, and the grey floor of the chasm was stippled with little figures. Some of them appeared as mere shadows, others carried touches of colour—red, yellow, green. The glare of electric lights lit up the fronts of some of the houses. The chasm seemed closed above by a pall of black velvet.

It was Elsie who spoke.

"Isn't it mysterious?"

"Not quite real—somehow. Like one of those puppet shows. Just down there on the left Keats died."

She murmured a line of his.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever."

They moved on towards the Villa Medici, and as they ap-

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proached the clouded gloom of the ilexes, Vane asked her a question.

"You must find that child rather trying?"

She was silent for some seconds. He saw her face in profile.

"Yes. I began to wonder—"

"She's not quite normal, is she?"

"Oh—I don't know. You see, I don't think she had ever had—anybody to trouble—really."

"And you do."

"Oh, one must. One can't let oneself be beaten. Besides, it's my job."

They paused in the shadow of the trees and stood looking over Rome, but Rome was a mere confusion of dark roofs and cornices and blurs of light. It was a background—impersonal, and against it a vivid sense of the personal was projecting itself. They were together, two strangers, suddenly conscious of intimate association, of things that might be said in the darkness.

"Why do you stick to it?"

He was momentarily afraid when he had asked her that question. Would she resent it, inwardly accuse him of blundering interference? He waited.

"Because—I have to."

"Conditions? Snub me—if you like."

She made a little movement of the head.

"You see, I had to take a job. When my father died—we had hardly any money. My mother lives in one room in London."

"Necessity. Did you know Mrs. Pym?"

"No. I only saw her twice, and the child once. It seemed such an opportunity, and of course—it is."

It was his turn to be silent. He was beginning to be glad that he had asked her that question. But supposing she should retort

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and expect him to be equally candid? How impossible!

He said: "I think you are very plucky. Some people feel things, you know, more than others. They hurt. But possibly that child may learn—. She should do."

Again there was silence, and when she broke it her voice sounded rested and tranquil.

"It does one good to talk. If one can't talk, take your troubles out of the cupboard—"

Was it a challenge, an invitation? He grew uneasy, acutely self-conscious. He moved slightly to one side as though suggesting to her that it was time to turn back.

"Yes, it helps. One is apt to get shut up in a cupboard. I like to look at all these lights. They mean windows, streets. Even the noise, what the French would call—*un vacarme assourdissant*—"

She found herself walking back with him towards SS. Trinita de Monti. Were they returning to the hotel? It seemed to her that they had been together for less than ten minutes, and out here in the darkness she had been able to breathe and to relax. For weeks she had been living in a state of tension, holding herself in, primping her lips, suppressing all emotion, and this soft night had a gentle beauty. She had found a friend, someone who would talk of her affairs, and give her that which is so much more precious and potent than advice—sympathy. Mr. Henry Vane. But would he not tell her something about himself? What had he been? What did he do? Did he too feel lonely? If she had opened the book of her self to him, would he not do likewise?

"Are you going to stay long in Rome?"

They had reached the top of the Spanish Steps when she asked him that question, and he did not answer it immediately.

"Another month—perhaps. I just drift about, you know. Have you ever looked up the steps from the piazza?"

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"Not at night."

"It's worth while."

As they descended the steps she had a feeling that he had become again the rather gentle stranger, a mere casual acquaintance who wished it to be understood that the personal and the impersonal should be nicely poised. Possibly, he had just felt sorry for her, and she was sufficiently woman to question that sort of pity. Poor Elsie Summerhays, governess to Mrs. Pym's child! And the night lost some of its mystery and its allure. A couple of lovers passed them with arms interlocked, and she felt that the silence had lasted too long.

"Which was Keats's window?"

He pointed it out, but did not pause. It was as though he had become shy of being too much alone with her.

"Poor Keats! Well, he's dead—anyway. I wonder what he would have thought of our tempestuous traffic. A sort of mechanical menagerie."

They reached the bottom of the steps, and she was aware of him saying something rude about Bernini's fountain. "Beastly rococo stuff." He turned and looked up, and she saw his face in the light of a lamp. The line of the jaw had a harshness; he looked haggard, and his eyes were mere slits.

Possibly he was conscious of her glance, for he reminded her that he had brought her down here to look at that tawny old church at the top of the great staircase.

"Rather impressive. That blur of light. And the façade seems to die away into the darkness."

She mouthed a meditative—"Yes."

"The fellow who planned these steps had vision. They give you such a feeling of height, of climbing to a sanctuary. They ought to be crowded with people dressed in bright colours, not a modern

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black crowd. Let's go along this way. We can strike the Via Sistina again."

She accompanied him dutifully along the pavement. The affair had become a formal promenade, and his conversation desultory and well informed. He assured her that Mussolini had a classic feeling for Rome, and that he was not the mere noise-monger that some of the little northern newspaper people wished him to be.

She agreed with him dutifully.

"Yes—I suppose he really is a great man."

But she was wondering what had become of the man in Mr. Henry Vane? Had she said anything that could be misconstrued? Had she let herself talk to him too intimately?

But—after all—he had begun it, and her too sensitive skin felt chilled.

CHAPTER TWELVE



*I*t rained, and it continued to rain for the best part of a week, and sitting out upon balconies ceased to be possible, and for the moment Rome had become a northern city, dim and grey. Elsie did not see Mr. Vane to speak to for five consecutive days, and she began to wonder whether he was avoiding her on purpose. She had feelings of her own to justify the suspicion. She was more than inclined towards continuity, and she had provided him with innocent opportunities. Knowing him to be in his room she had—when going down to tea—closed the door of her own room with suggestive emphasis and lingered in the corridor, but Mr. Vane's door had remained shut.

On these wet afternoons she completed the romance of "Jack and Irene," and deciding to put the tale into type, she got out her typewriter and set to work. The machine chattered aggressively in the small room, and it occurred to her that she might be disturbing her neighbour. Nothing could disturb the Italian woman on the other side, and in that quarter Elsie was more sinned against than sinning.

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She went out into the passage, and after a moment's hesitation knocked gently at Vane's door.

"Mr. Vane."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, but does my typewriter worry you?"

"Not in the least, thank you."

There was no further response from him, and she went back to her own room feeling foolish. What a silly, impulsive thing to have done, and she had been repulsed. Yes, politely but most obviously so. But why? She reseated herself at the table, and picked up the point in her manuscript where she had broken off, and her fingers began to rattle the keys. The bell went ping, and the regular repetition of that tiny, warning note irritated her. And she was making mistakes, misplacing and mis-spelling words. There stood "rabit" with one b. Oh, bother the thing! She was a fairly expert typist, and only rarely did she and her machine bicker, but on this wet afternoon her thoughts interfered with her fingers.

Mr. Henry Vane! Mr. Henry Vane!

That she was more interested in the man next door than in her manuscript was suggested by the stammering notes, and if she exclaimed to herself inwardly: "Oh, don't be sentimental!" such self-chastisement did not stop the flow of impulse. For he was an interesting person. He had an appeal for her. He was so solitary and aloof, and sometimes she was sure that he looked most sad. He spoke to no one in the hotel, but he had spoken to her. He had taken her out to look at Rome by night.

The machine perpetrated an outrage. Sloshboo. Now, what on earth was the thing doing? A vulgar, impossible and imaginary word that was not in the dictionary. It reminded her of one of Sally's forceful and expressive improvisations. But what should she have imposed upon the page? Lush and beautiful, and those

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two most æsthetic and cultivated words had become Sloshboo.

She gave it up. She put the typewriter away, and thrust the manuscript into a drawer. And another word came into her head. She had spoken to Mr. Vane of cupboards and suggested that things got shut up in cupboards. Skeletons! Had he suspected her of trying to imply that he had a skeleton of his own? But how absurd! Of course, there could be no such thing. But then— Well, might there be? Some tragic affair that had made him sensitive and aloof and strange, a Byronic figure, a kind of modern Cain? Most improbable, that is to say the Cain part of it. She could allow him a semi-Byronic mystery. Had something happened in his life? Had some woman—? And he was afraid of women, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*; he was what people had called a misogynist.

There was an atmosphere of innocence surrounding Elsie. Of course she knew about things, but not quite as the sophisticated young modern knows about them. Sex and reality had been sublimated for her into a language of symbolism, and she continued to regard life with the eyes of a serious and sensitive child. Rome was *The Eternal City*, Sacred and Profane Love was a beautiful allegory, Keats was not a poor consumptive spitting blood but a rapt spirit gazing at the stars. Chopin made her skin tingle and her eyes grow tender. She was a Pre-Raphaelite creature going for a drive in a taxi.

She found herself standing by her wardrobe and looking into the mirror. "Stoop down, stoop down to the water, *Melisande*." But the variant was otherwise.

She thought: "I wish I hadn't so much forehead. I might manage to bring my hair down lower."

II

The expedition to Frascati was Mr. Allabaster's idea, for though

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there were no leaves on the trees and the hill town was a summer resort, there was always the view, and Frascati was to be Mr. Allabaster's Venusberg. The wet week had passed, and the weather was springlike, and Mr. Allabaster was on his toes, and prating about the chef at the little Hotel Aldobrandini. They could enjoy the view from the hotel terrace, dine and go to bed. Yes, the hotel was centrally heated, if that could be considered necessary in the House of Eros. Of course, Miss Gasson could accompany them, and that damned kid would remain at the Elyseo with the admirable Miss Summerhays. Mr. Allabaster would arrange for the car.

"Just a suit-case affair, you know."

The phrase was most apposite, and Mrs. Pym accepted it with all its implications, and Mr. Allabaster drove over to Frascati to order a particular dinner and to be even more particular about the bedrooms. The Aldobrandini was almost completely his, for only three people were staying in it at the moment.

Mrs. Pym's explanations were whimsical.

"Monte wants to show me the view and a pet chef, and he wants you to come, Syb."

Miss Gasson understood. Women should support each other.

It was a very gentle afternoon when a big Fiat carried the party and its suit-cases to Frascati, and Vane went out and walked in the Borghese Gardens, and by the lake in the midst of its tall trees he met Miss Summerhays and Sally. It was wholly a coincidence and unpremeditated, this incident of the Giardino del Lago. It could not be avoided. Vane raised his hat, Elsie coloured up; Sally was feeling sociable.

"Hallo, Mr. Baedeker."

Vane saw the joke and accepted it. Miss Summerhays was looking faintly confused, perhaps because Mr. Vane's eyes had be-

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trayed an interested and equal shyness, and for the moment the occasion was Sally's.

"I want to apologize to Mr. Vane. I was a little beast, wasn't I?"

Vane gave her a hand, and said something about the loss of tempers being universal.

"I might have given you a black eye."

"Yes, you might have done."

Sally held on to his hand. She was playing the part of the little lady.

"Summer never loses her temper. Do you, Summer?"

"Oh yes, sometimes."

"Not like mother does. Mother's gone to Frascati with old Monte."

"Mr. Allabaster, dear."

Sally corrected herself.

"Mr. Montague Allabaster, C.C."

Vane laughed.

"What does C.C. stand for? County Councillor?"

"No, Cheshire Cat."

Vane, meeting Elsie's eyes, wondered what had happened to Miss Summerhays. She looked different, more attractive, yes, much more attractive. He had thought her a rather plain young woman, and she was nothing of the sort. Her eyes— Yes, she had quite beautiful eyes, and a woman's eyes were the woman. They gave that essential quality to a face. But he had been co-opted into the party by Sally, and he turned and strolled along with them under the trees where the sunlight made a criss-cross of light and of shadow. He could hear the voices of children at play.

He was thinking: "A woman with eyes like that might understand. But could she? The crude, violent egotism of such an act! It happened, and it happened to me—but now it seems so utterly

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unexplainable, so brutal. How could she understand? She hasn't anything of the brute in her."

Sally, staring up into his face, said "Penny," and with gentle playfulness he warned her that an English penny had no purchasing power in Rome.

"All right, a lira."

"Not enough."

"Two lire, three lire."

"Well, let's see, I might do it at the price. I was thinking that someone looks rather nice to-day."

Sally smiled at him.

"Yes, I do look rather nice in a beret, don't I?"

"Well, what about the three lire?"

"Ask Summer. She'll pay."

"Oh, that's your idea of business!"

Sally chortled. She began to skip and to do dance-steps, and the little restless, posturing figure was dominant. Her impulse was to exhibit herself in physical audacities, to speed her car, to zoom her aeroplane. They had reached the broad roadway outside the Giardino del Lago, and Sally saw her chance.

"I'll show you."

"Sylvia, don't—"

But she broke away and, dashing in front of an oncoming car, caused the Italian driver to hoot furiously, and then she raced on and across to the farther pathway. She stood there for a moment daring and defiant, and, before she could be prevented, prepared to give them an encore, but she did not appear to see that second car pulling out to pass the one which she had meant to dodge. There was a cry from Elsie; she clutched Vane's arm; but it all happened so quickly. The off wing of the second car seemed to catch the child and throw her aside.

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Vane saw Elsie run blindly into the road, and a car coming from the other direction had to swerve and use its brakes. Almost instantly there was a little crowd, with two Roman taxi-drivers becoming voluble and dramatic—but when Vane got across, Miss Summerhays had the child in her arms. Sally was screaming, but she was not fatally hurt.

"Oh, my arm, Summer; my arm!"

Vane pushed through the gathering crowd to Elsie's side.

"Shall I take her?"

"No, I can manage. I must get her to the hotel. Is there a taxi? Oh, do let's get away from the crowd."

Her shocked white face moved him to compassion, and to something more than compassion, whereas the child's outcry left him cold. He found a use for his immature Italian, for the taxi that had bowled Sally over happened to be empty, and the driver was a humanist. Yes, he would drive the lady and the child anywhere. The accident had been no fault of his, the gentleman would have to allow that, and if the police took the matter up he had evidence to prove—Yes, yes. Vane did his best to explain that he agreed as to the inevitableness of the accident, and would he drive them instantly to the Hotel Elyseo? The man opened the door of the cab, and Vane got in and told Elsie to pass the child to him.

"It's that left arm."

"Yes."

Some understanding and sympathetic person in the crowd produced a scarf, and passing it round Sally, fastened it so that the broken arm was supported against the child's body.

"Thank you so much. The Hotel Elyseo. I will give the scarf to the porter."

"Do not worry, signorina."

The taxi got clear of the crowd before anything official and in

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uniform appeared to produce a notebook and to waste time, and in two minutes they were at the door of the Elyseo. Sally had ceased screaming, and Elsie emerged and held out her arms for the child.

"Oh, yes—I can manage. I'll take her up in the lift. Oh, would you ring up a doctor, an English doctor?"

"Are you sure you can manage?"

"Oh, yes."

"I'll ring up at once."

Again a small crowd was beginning to gather. A hotel porter appeared just in time to open one of the glass doors for Elsie, and Vane turned to the driver of the taxi.

"How much?"

But the man would not take anything. It was a terrible thing to have knocked down a child. It had never happened to him before; no, *signore*, never. Vane took off his hat to the man; it was the sort of gesture that seemed natural and adequate. He hurried in and got hold of the concierge. He must telephone at once to one of the English doctors, and the concierge had better ring up, for Vane did not feel his Italian equal to the demands of the exchange. The concierge was quite equal to the occasion.

"Dr. Johnson. He comes here—often."

Within three minutes Vane found himself speaking to an Englishman.

"Would you come round here at once, doctor? The Hotel Elyseo. A child has been knocked down by a car. Yes, an English child staying here. Pym is the name. Right, you'll come at once. I think an arm's broken. Thanks—very much."

What next? He went upstairs to the second floor and knocked at the door of Mrs. Pym's suite. No one answered him, so he opened the door and called.

"Miss Summerhays, a doctor will be here in a few minutes."

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Elsie appeared to him for a moment, a white, scared, self-accusing Elsie.

"Thank you so much. It's terrible. I feel it was all my fault."

"Not in the least."

"Mrs. Pym will be so—so angry."

Yes, there was the problem of Mrs. Pym.

III

The doctor was most reassuring. The child was bruised, and there was a simple fracture of the humerus, and he rang up an Italian confrère, a very capable surgeon, and between them they dealt with that fractured arm. Elsie sat on the bed and supported Sylvia. She had expected a scene, screams, struggles, protests, but Sally behaved with unusual docility. The doctors praised her; she liked praise.

But the problem of Mrs. Pym!

For only after the catastrophe did Elsie realize that she did not know the name of the Frascati hotel at which Mrs. Pym would be staying. It seemed absurd, but it was so, and she rushed downstairs to the concierge's office and to the bureau, only to discover that they were as innocent as she was.

Meeting Vane on the stairs she appealed to him.

"Oh, Mr. Vane, what shall I do? I don't know Mrs. Pym's address."

"You don't know her address?"

"I know it sounds absurd. And the hotel doesn't know it. She and Miss Gasson are spending the night somewhere at Frascati."

"Get the concierge to ring up the principal hotel."

"Yes, I suppose that is the only thing to do."

Vane was going in to dinner, and when he had finished his

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dinner and strolled out again into the lounge, Miss Summerhays was still waiting anxiously upon the patience of the concierge and the whims of the telephone. It was in a very whimsical mood that night. The concierge had rung up the Grand Hotel, Frascati, the Villetta, the Leone, the Cipoletta. He had been cut off twice during the investigation, and had engaged in an eloquent argument with the exchange. None of these hotels knew anything of Mrs. Pym. The concierge was becoming a little tired of the affair, and there were other clients to be attended to, and the exchange was on its dignity.

Elsie was very worried.

"We can't find them anywhere."

"But they must be there. Has he tried every hotel?"

"I believe there is one more."

It was now nearly nine o'clock, and Vane, taking a fifty-lire note from his wallet, slipped it across to the concierge. It had an excellent effect. The concierge explained that he had yet to ring up the Hotel Aldobrandini, but that the whole telephone system was an abomination and that certain people needed assassinating. He proceeded to get into touch with the Hotel Aldobrandini. It took him twenty minutes, and then that particular hotel proved more elusive than any of its predecessors. A man's voice answered, and then sudden silence intervened. The Hotel Aldobrandini appeared to have cut itself off. It refused to respond to a second attack.

The concierge shrugged his shoulders. He was a very fat man, and yet he took things to heart and perspired over them.

"It is impossible. No one will pay any attention."

Elsie looked at Vane.

"What can I do? I simply must let her know—somehow."

"All I can suggest is that you might take a car and drive over

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to Frascati, and try the different hotels. It is only about fifteen miles to Frascati."

"But I don't like leaving the child."

"Well, shall I go and see what I can do?"

Her worried face cleared.

"Would you? How awfully good of you. I don't mind paying for the car."

"Don't worry about that."

Once more the concierge was persuaded to telephone. Yes, a car was procurable; it would be at the hotel in fifteen minutes, and Vane went upstairs to fetch a coat and a hat and a pocket Italian dictionary. Elsie was waiting for him in the vestibule, a very grateful and trusting Elsie.

"It is so kind of you. I'm sure you will be able to find them, and Mrs. Pym can come straight back with you. Of course, I shall wait up."

It was nearly half-past ten when the car reached the little town on the Alban Hills, and the concierge having explained the situation to the driver, he proceeded to take the hotels in succession. Neither the Grand nor the Leone knew anything of Mrs. Pym, but at the Aldobrandini, which came third, Vane knew that he had run the fox to earth. The place had closed for the night, and a waiter in his shirt sleeves opened the door, and seemed none too ready to let Vane in. Vane explained that the matter was urgent, and that he had a message for Mrs. Pym, the English lady. Mrs. Pym? The unwelcoming waiter let him in, but left him in the vestibule, and, disappearing, produced the *padrone*. The proprietor was large and sallow and suspicious. He appeared to regard Vane with some hostility. He spoke some English.

"What you want, sir?"

Vane explained that he wanted to see Mrs. Pym, whose child

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had had an accident, and the Italian looked down his fat nose and appeared to be puzzling something out. He did not say that there was no Mrs. Pym in the hotel. He said that the ladies had gone to bed, but he would see what could be done about it. He left Vane to sit down on a bent cane chair in the dark and unprepossessing vestibule, and Vane also was trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle into their proper or improper places. The concierge had been telephoning for Mrs. Pym, and the party was all Allabaster.

He heard shuffling footsteps. Mr. Montague himself appeared in red leather slippers and a blue and orange silk dressing-gown. He did not look pleased. He was polite but sulky.

"What's all this?"

He recognized Vane as one of the clients of the Elyseo, and Vane stood up.

"We've been trying to get into touch with Mrs. Pym. The child has been knocked down by a taxi. Yes, a broken arm. I came over to help Miss Summerhays."

Mr. Allabaster stared. That damned kid again!

"Have you had a doctor in?"

"Yes, two doctors. They set the fracture. The child's not badly hurt. Perhaps you will break the news to Mrs. Pym?"

From somewhere Mr. Allabaster produced two cigars. He carried cigars as some men grow fountain pens. He offered one to Vane, but Vane refused it. Mr. Allabaster, with an air of sententious deliberation, lit his and spoke smoothly.

"Fact is, Mrs. Pym's gone to bed with a bad headache. Yes, she went to bed quite early. Quite a minor tragedy, my dear sir. She couldn't enjoy anything. You say the child is in no danger?"

"I understand she's not."

"And the admirable Miss Summerhays is with her?"

"Yes."

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Mr. Allabaster spoke confidentially, benignantly.

"Well, really, I don't want to disturb the poor lady. Nearly eleven o'clock, too. Really—that would be rather *bête* and unkind, wouldn't it? I certainly think so. Let her sleep. After all, she can't do anything, can she? And between two men, sir, if a woman's upset she'll only go and upset other people, excite the child when the child ought to be sleeping."

He gazed affably and with friendliness upon Vane, and Vane, who had caught the faint bouquet of the affair, realized that a cynical opportunism might be tactful. There are occasions when one should hold a handkerchief delicately to one's nose.

He got up.

"There is something in what you say. If Mrs. Pym—"

"I shall bring her over first thing in the morning. Really, most kind of you to take all this trouble."

"Oh, that's nothing. I'll warn Miss Summerhays. I mean—I'll reassure her."

And realizing that Mr. Allabaster wanted him out of the hotel, and that Mrs. Pym was not exactly Parian marble, he wished Mr. Allabaster good night and returned to the waiting car.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*B*UT there remained the problem of Elsie. What should he say to Miss Summerhays in order to reduce the situation to its proper proportions? Treat it casually? Explain that Mrs. Pym's headache was really a monstrous headache, and that she had unlimited faith in Elsie, and that the fond mother would arrive in Rome soon after daylight? But would she? And why should he be worrying about Miss Summerhays' sensitiveness, and about the distress in those pleasant dark eyes? Because—somehow—he wanted to—? But that was impossible. Life for him could be only a carefully impersonal affair.

He found Elsie waiting up for him in the empty lounge, and when she saw that he was alone she inferred that he had failed to find the elusive mother. She looked very tired, but she stood up and managed to smile.

"I'm so sorry. All your trouble for nothing?"

His whole purpose was to set her mind at rest.

"No. I found them all right. The Hotel Aldobrandini. Mrs. Pym will be over early in the morning."

"Not till the morning?"

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"Apparently Mrs. Pym had to go to bed with a very bad headache. She was in bed when I got there. I saw Mr. Allabaster."

He produced a cigarette-case, opened it and held it out to her.

"Have one? Of course, I reassured them. And they have great faith in you."

Elsie had taken a cigarette, but she did not seem to know what to do with it. She sat down on one of the plum-coloured sofas and looked a little bewildered. She took things so very seriously.

"Of course, Mr. Allabaster told her?"

"Of course. He seems quite a kind person. There is nothing for you to worry about."

He struck a match and held it suggestively towards her, and she lit her cigarette as though she had not done such a thing before. Her forehead betrayed her perplexity.

"I think she ought to have come."

Vane lit a cigarette for himself.

"Possibly. But a woman with a cracking head, and in a rather emotional state, might not have been particularly good for the child. How is Sylvia?"

"Asleep. Dr. Johnson came about ten and gave her a mild sleeping-draught."

Vane looked down at her very kindly.

"Well, you will be able to go to bed. You are tired out. May I prescribe something?"

"Oh, I'm quite all right."

"A whisky and soda. It will help you to sleep."

"Oh, no—really—I never take such a thing. I shall lie down on the sofa in the sitting-room with Sally's door open. She can't be left."

Vane looked at her serious, bothered head.

"Must you?"

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"Of course I must."

"Yes, I suppose that's so. You are one of those people who can't give up."

He sat down beside her and they finished their cigarettes, and Vane wondered how much Elsie knew, or how much she suspected. And did it matter? Was it not possible that much of the stress of life was caused by people taking things too seriously and conceiving it to be their duty to readjust or carry other people's burdens? Yes, just as the Englishman may take sex too seriously. A more frivolous or a more natural generation might laugh and remodel the title and text of that most witty play and call it "The Danger of Being Too Much Earnest." His own personal tragedy had been set alight by an act of egotistical savagery, and had smouldered to nothingness through all these years, leaving him like a man with his mouth full of ashes.

Elsie stood up.

"I must be going now."

He walked with her towards the lift.

"Don't take things too seriously, especially other people's affairs."

She gave him a quick, shy, kindling glance.

"That isn't quite convincing from you. Thank you, so very much—" and the lift carried her upstairs.

Sally was asleep, and going to her own room Elsie collected a dressing-gown, a quilt and a pillow, and returning to Mrs. Pym's suite she improvised a bed on the sofa. The communicating door stood open, and Elsie had left one shaded light burning in the child's room. She took off her frock, and putting on the dressing-gown lay down on the sofa and covered herself with the quilt. She was awake for an hour or more, for the events of the day kept passing and repassing through her consciousness, but the day's most significant figure was that of Mr. Henry Vane.

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She fell asleep, and about two in the morning she was roused by a voice calling her.

"Summer—Summer!"

She was up instantly.

"Coming, dear."

The child looked flushed and heavy-eyed.

"Summer, I want a drink."

Elsie filled a glass with water, and sitting on the edge of the bed, supported Sally's head. Some of the water ran down Sally's chin on to her neck and chest, and had to be mopped up with a towel.

"How's the arm feeling, dear? Hurting much?"

"No, not very much. What you been doing, Summer?"

"Having a little sleep on the sofa in there."

"Where's mother?"

"She's coming to see you early to-morrow."

Sally's blue eyes fixed themselves on Elsie's face.

"Does she know I've got a broken arm?"

For a moment Elsie hesitated, only to realize that her hesitation had been fatal.

"Yes, of course, dear. Mr. Vane went over to Frascati to tell her. She has a very bad headache and had to go to bed."

Sally blinked her eyes.

"I know all about mother's headaches. She always gets a headache when she doesn't want to do things."

Elsie smoothed the bedclothes and tried not to look shocked.

"Now go to sleep again, dear. I shall be in there. You've been very brave and good."

"Hold my hand, Summer, and I'll go to sleep."

"Yes, I'll hold your hand."

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II

In spite of that hypothetical headache, Mrs. Pym returned to the Hotel Elyseo at what was for her a very early hour, and she returned in a hypothetical temper. The doctor had come and gone. He had been satisfied with Sally and with Sally's amateur nurse, and had discreetly accepted the non-appearance of the mother. Mrs. Pym arrived suddenly in the suite looking rather heavy-eyed and high-coloured, and in a state of nerves. She found Elsie sitting beside Sally's bed and reading a book to her.

Mrs. Pym fell feverishly upon her daughter.

"Oh, darly, darly, what have you been doing!"

Darly-darly stared steadily at her mother, and eluded the pragmatical kiss.

"Mind my arm."

Mrs. Pym, most obviously repulsed, turned suddenly upon Miss Summerhays. Sundry irritations and after effects had to be expended upon somebody.

"I want a few words."

Elsie followed her into the sitting-room and was told to close the connecting-door, and Mrs. Pym sat down on the sofa with her thin shoulders pricked. She was in a mood to make a scene.

"Now—I want to know all about this. I go away for a few hours and you let the child get smashed up. How did it happen?"

Elsie stood rigid.

"We were in the gardens, and as we were coming home Sally rushed away and played at dodging cars."

"Dodging cars! How perfectly—"

"But you know—she's so impulsive. She did it before I could—yes, Mr. Vane can tell you—"

"Mr. Vane! So you had a man with you. Who is Mr. Vane?"

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"The gentleman who sits in the corner. We met him in the gardens. He has spoken to us once or twice—"

Mrs. Pym had her chance. Her raw mouth seemed to grow ragged.

"Oh—I see. You were busy with a man—meanwhile—my child—"

Elsie was all red and confused.

"No. That's really—too—unfair."

"Unfair! What were you doing with this fellow, anyway? Directly my back's turned. Of course, the thing's so obvious. It's perfectly disgraceful."

Mrs. Pym's voice had a way of rising to a sharp crescendo when her temper was taking a fine edge.

"Gallivanting about and getting fresh with any sort of casual cad. I didn't engage you to gad about with men."

Elsie's chin quivered; her knees shook.

"Mrs. Pym—I—really—"

There was an interruption, a door thrust open, Sally in her pyjamas with arm splinted and face all red. She confronted her mother.

"It's a lie. It wasn't Summer's fault."

"Sally!"

"My dear—out of bed!"

"You shan't scold Summer. What about old Monte! I know all about your headaches. Summer sat up half the night with me, while you and old Allybaster—"

Tornado! Sudden bellowings from Sally, Mrs. Pym getting up and sitting down again with hands like claws and her mouth awry. "You little beast!" Elsie was the only one of the three who had some head left. She picked up Sally, and carried her back to bed, covered her up, and then burst into tears.

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"You mustn't talk like that, dear. Your arm—too."

Sally, suddenly and strangely sobered, stared at Miss Summerhays' wet face.

"She's made you blub. She can't make me blub. She and old Allybaster!"

Someone closed the communicating-door. It was Mrs. Pym, for Miss Sybil Gasson had come into the room with her whimsical "So this is love" smile. Miss Gasson was the one person who could handle Mrs. Pym, even as Elsie appeared likely to be Sally's salvation, for Miss Gasson could be so supremely and smoothly indifferent and yet so witty and amusing. She refrigerated Diana Pym, and put that most undisciplined person into cold storage.

"I'll sack the wench. Messing about with men. I'll send her back to England."

"I shouldn't do that."

Miss Gasson passed a cool, calm hand over the crumpled page. Diana might have no sense of humour, but it was necessary that she should exercise common sense. The cake could not be all on one plate, and no one had been as successful with Sally as Miss Summerhays. The girl was a very patient, conscientious creature, and most of her contemporaries were not capable of suffering Sally for more than five minutes. Mrs. Pym mixed herself a tonic from her private bar in the wardrobe, and confessed that her headache had returned with devastating fierceness.

"You go and lie down. I'll have a few words with Miss Summerhays. In my opinion she's worth keeping."

III

So thought Mr. Henry Vane, but the reflection was that of some helpless invalid sitting at an open window and watching the *va et*

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viant of a street. Pure disinterestedness, when considered as a philosophical abstraction, may appear both pleasant and possible, but like the theory of the conservation of energy, it is neither welcome at the breakfast-table nor consoling to the human heart, and if Vane had visualized Rome as a dead city, he should have lived between the covers of his Baedeker. It may be possible to retain the impersonal attitude in a picture gallery or a museum, and to meditate calmly upon the House of the Vestals or the Column of Phocas, but when a man's hands touch and open the book of life its cover has a redness that is other than the redness of Baedeker.

"Quite impossible."

Some angel of the Lord planted himself in the path of nature, and the good ass spoke those words. "Quite impossible." Had Mrs. Pym been the attraction, and the affair comparable to thunder and lightning in June, the phase would have been mere alabaster, but Elsie was otherwise. And Vane, wandering about Rome like a man who had come to life, found that life could be excessively painful and full of strange pangs. It was so curiously suggestive. Did Lazarus feel these pangs when Christ rescued him from the tomb? The scent and the colour of flowers, the green tops of the trees, hills vaguely blue, sudden splendours of wet sunlight, a bunch of violets bought on the Spanish steps!

He had purchased these flowers with the idea of presenting them to Miss Summerhays, only to realize that such an act would be much too personal and provocative. And of course they ended their lives in his tooth-glass on a corner of the dressing-table near his window.

Though Elsie was not very visible these days. She was acting as Sally's nurse, for when Dr. Johnson had advised the retaining of a trained nurse for the first week, the experiment had not proved

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successful. Sally had objected and with passion.

"I want Summer."

In the face of the shocked stranger she had hurled a feeding-cup across the room, and Elsie had become inevitable. She was the only person who had any control over the child, and it surprised her, and perhaps it touched her. She and Sally had some appeal for each other. Her little pink bedroom on the fourth floor had to be sacrificed, and the management provided her with a bedroom next to Sally's. There were no more balcony scenes, no tentative and self-conscious conversations.

Mrs. Pym was philosophic over the routing of the professional.

"Well, it will save expense."

She had her financial problems, the embarrassments that trouble the extravagantly selfish.

She had other problems, and one of them was Sally's sudden hostility towards her mother, a curious and elemental enmity that had its roots somewhere in the unrevealed subconsciousness of Sally. This hostility showed itself in a sullen and obstinate silence, and whenever Mrs. Pym entered the child's room Sally became dumb, or emitted abrupt monosyllables. Her blue eyes became like hard blue pebbles. It was as though the little sadist in her, in sparing Elsie, transferred its spite to the person of the mother.

Mrs. Pym brought Darly-Darly chocolates, and Sally flung them on the floor.

"Don't want your beastly chocolates."

As a child Mrs. Pym had perpetrated much the same outrages, but that did not help her to understand Sally; also, to the reasoning and adult mind Sally's tempestuous moods were beyond reason. Whatever fire flared in her, the flames must have their way.

Mrs. Pym complained to Miss Gasson.

"I can't think what's the matter with the kid. She used to be

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more or less all right with me, but now she's absolutely impossible."

"I thought she was rather better. Miss Summerhays—"

Mrs. Pym flared up.

"Yes, she's got an absolute pash for Summerhays. I've never known her like it before. It's not healthy."

Miss Gasson was growing a little tired of the Pym *ménage*, and contemplating voyaging alone.

"Well, the girl does seem able to control Sally. She's stuck to the job pretty well. And after all, that's what you engaged her for."

Mrs. Pym was powdering her nose.

"It isn't that I have a jealous nature, but you'd think that the girl was turning the kid against me."

"I'm quite sure she is not doing anything of the kind. She's not that sort."

"Well, why should the kid be so damned funny?"

"We are rather funny at that age, aren't we? I remember developing an absolute passion for a painter fellow who was decorating the drawing-room. Just imagine! I got as far as presenting him with a bunch of wallflowers. Besides, kids are queer, jealous little animals."

Mrs. Pym bridled.

"You don't mean that she is jealous of Monte? Don't be absurd."

"My dear, I am never absurd."

"She hasn't been like this before when—lads have been a little interested."

"Oh, quite likely. I'm not equal to psychoing Sally. It's just a phase, probably. I should leave her to the girl."

Mrs. Pym examined herself in her mirror.

"Really, I don't look my age, do I, Syb?"

"My dear, you're marvellous."

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If Mr. Vane was shy of meeting Elsie, Elsie had reasons for being shy of meeting Mr. Vane. Mrs. Pym's accusations had shocked her far more than was necessary, but the sensitive in Elsie was vulnerable to the vulgarities of Mrs. Pym. For Elsie took sex and all its mysteries very seriously, and if someone showed her a maggot in her rose she was too apt to think that the creature was of her own creating, and had not been foisted into the flower by other fingers. And when Sally inquired: "Have you seen Mr. Baedeker?" she tactfully could say that she had not. But at the same time she was feeling that Mr. Vane had been treated rather cavalierly. He had received no official thanks, and he had been left to pay for the car to Frascati.

Elsie was worried about the cost of that car.

Should she write a polite little note and ask him to tell her the amount? She would prefer to pay the money herself, for in the matter of finance Elsie was discovering a certain turgidity in Mrs. Pym. She had two months' salary owing to her, and quite diffidently she had twice reminded Mrs. Pym of the fact, and Mrs. Pym had said: "Oh—I'll write you a cheque," and had forgotten all about it.

It was so unpleasant to have to ask people for money, even though the money was yours and you had earned it.

This shadow dance between the souls of Mr. Henry Vane and Miss Elsie Summerhays would have delighted Miss Gasson. Were two such people left in a world of contraceptive common sense, with Diana and Adonis very much resurrected, and the eugenists and psychologists ready to supply you with diagrams in detail? Mr. Vane's violets withered in that glass, and were laid to rest in the wastepaper basket before the obvious alternative presented itself. If he could not buy flowers for Miss Summerhays, he could buy them for Miss Sylvia Pym.

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Obviously! He ought to have thought of it before. He owed the child a present for having created for him an opportunity. Besides, even a little savage like Sally might find pleasure in flowers.

Vane went out and bought a sheaf of carnations at a flower-shop in the Via Veneto. Returning to the Hotel Elyseo, he was seen by Miss Sybil Gasson sitting with an air of indecision on a chair in the lounge, with the flowers and their cone of tissue-paper laid upon a table. Should he send the flowers up by one of the hotel pages or present them in person? He hesitated for quite five minutes before he decided to act as his own standard-bearer, and to dare the forlorn hope.

He knocked at the door of Mrs. Pym's suite, and was prepared for the simplest of salutations—"Oh, how is Sally? I have just brought her a few flowers"—but he had not prepared himself for an encounter with Mrs. Pym. It was she who opened the door. She was dressed to go out.

They stared at each other, and then Vane found his voice.

"I have come to inquire for Sylvia, and I have brought her a few flowers."

Mrs. Pym gave him a little cynical smile. Did the man think she was such a fool? But why not see the joke through?

"Very kind of you, I'm sure. Miss Summerhays!"

Elsie appeared in the room behind Mrs. Pym.

"Oh, Miss Summerhays, this gentleman has brought you some flowers."

Both the silly creatures blushed and looked self-conscious, and Mrs. Pym, busy with her gloves, knew that the laugh was hers.

Vane stood holding the carnations.

"I thought Sylvia might like some of them."

Elsie was betraying to Mrs. Pym an exquisite confusion. Really, the girl looked almost pretty!

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"How kind of you! Aren't they lovely!"

Vane handed her the flowers.

"I hope Sylvia is getting on well?"

"Oh, splendidly."

"I'm glad."

Mrs. Pym was most patiently presiding over the interview. She controlled the situation and could limit it and rationalize it. She watched them both with an air of thin and world-wise comprehension.

"Dear Sally, she'll be so pleased."

Elsie put the flowers to her face and prepared to escape.

"I'll go and put them in water."

She did give Vane one significant glance before Mrs. Pym made it plain to him that she was going out and that he was going with her away from the door. In fact they walked along the passage together, and entered the lift and were lowered to the lounge.

Vane stood aside for her to pass out.

"I'm so glad the child is getting on well."

Mrs. Pym gave him an enigmatic glance.

"I'm sure you are. Thanks. Good day."

She giggled to Sybil Gasson. "Caught the chap with a bunch of flowers. Had the cheek to tell me they were for Sally. Fancy a fellow handing Summerhays a bouquet!"

Miss Gasson had an absent air.

"Quite bright of him. I think the car's outside."

That evening a little note was brought by a page to Vane's room. He opened it and read:

DEAR MR. VANE,

It was so kind of you to bring the flowers. Sally was delighted. I have put them in a vase by her bed. I'm so worried

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about a certain matter. Do let me pay for the car you hired the other night. If you will let me know the amount I will put it in an envelope and leave it with the concierge.

Yours sincerely,

ELSIE SUMMERHAYS.

Vane sat down, and after much reflection replied to the note:


DEAR MISS SUMMERHAYS,

The little thing I did was a pleasure. Please allow it to remain a pleasure. My love to Sally.

Sincerely yours,

HENRY VANE.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



s. Pym managed her "affairs" much as she might have managed a private hotel in the part of proprietress. She was a woman of means, but those little, claw-like hands of hers were apt to insinuate themselves into the pocket of pleasure, and what her mouth enjoyed her hands made profitable. Her school of economics admitted the humanities, and if Adonis came to stay, well—something had to be allowed to the charming youth, and no return would be claimed on the capital expended. But when a man was over forty you had the right to expect some interest on your money. He was on the debit side of love's ledger. You did not send in an account, but the discreet and gentlemanly gesture might be counted on.

Mrs. Pym owed Elsie twenty-four pounds, and Elsie wanted the money. Christmas was at hand, and Elsie had been allowing those precious pounds to accumulate because she had planned to send the bulk of the sum to her mother as a pleasant surprise for the solitary Madonna of Pulteney Street. Very apologetically she had suggested to Mrs. Pym that she was in need of cash, and Mrs. Pym had explained that she would be cashing a cheque to-morrow,

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and that Elsie should be paid.

Very possibly the cheque was cashed, but Elsie saw none of the proceeds, and for the third time of asking she approached Mrs. Pym.

"I do hate worrying you, but I want to send a Christmas present to my mother."

Mrs. Pym looked annoyed.

"Oh, your wages—of course. I'm sorry, but I'm having a draft sent out, and it hasn't come yet."

"Perhaps you could write me a cheque. Or if you would make it out to my mother I could post it home, and she could cash it, couldn't she?"

Like many women Mrs. Pym was much more ready to write cheques than to part with cash.

"Yes, I can do that, Miss Summerhays. How much?"

"Twenty pounds will do. Please make the cheque payable to Mary Summerhays."

Mrs. Pym wrote the cheque, and handed it to Elsie as though she was conferring a favour, and Elsie—being Elsie—behaved as though she was receiving a favour.

"Thank you—so much. I do so want mother to get this for Christmas. I suppose I had better give you a receipt?"

Mrs. Pym agreed.

"It would be as well, wouldn't it?"

But Elsie did not know that Mrs. Pym was suffering from a relative embarrassment, and that though she possessed two thousand a year her margin was perennially narrow, for when a woman loves herself very dearly and expresses that love in mink and much millinery her balance at the bank is apt to be hypothetical. Moreover, Mrs. Pym had hinted to Mr. Allabaster that she was temporarily stony, and she had given him neither a stone nor a scor-

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pion. Any man of means and of magnanimity would have offered her—at least—a loan.

He had not responded. He had screwed that monocle into his eye, and yet it had not focused the suggestion. And Mrs. Pym, while keeping the honey-pot in evidence, had shown a claw.

"That kid's accident had run me a bit short. These doctors—! You might lend me a couple of hundred, Monte."

Mr. Allabaster had allowed her to assume that the loan would be forthcoming. He, too, was waiting for a draft. Oh yes, he might be able to manage it for her, though these damned socialists were bleeding a chap white.

When anything unpleasant happened to Mrs. Pym she did not transcend the tragedy, or with an air of sweet reasonableness conceal it from the world. She behaved just like her small daughter. She let fly in every direction, and when Miss Gasson—who was resting before a dance at the Excelsior—heard that rataplan on the door and Diana's voice, she sighed.

"Oh, let me in. Something's happened."

Something had happened. Miss Gasson rose and opened the door and allowed the flood to enter.

"Monte's welshed me."

"What!"

"Yes, done a bunk. I went round to the Grand to have tea with him. Would you believe it?—I sat in the lounge for half an hour—and when the fellow didn't turn up I got hold of the concierge and told him to send up a page to Monte's room. 'But—madam—Mr. Allabaster has left.' 'Left!' 'Yes, last night, madam.' Yes, sneaked off by the night express. No letter, no anything. Nice sort of bloody fool I looked. My dear, I've never been so insulted."

"But he was coming to the Excelsior to-night!"

"Just bluff, my dear, just bluff."

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Mrs. Pym sat down in a chair and gave way to emotion. She looked just like Sally in one of her rain storms.

"No letter, no address. Just sneaked off and left me holding the baby. And I've been very decent to that man."

Miss Gasson lit a cigarette.

"Yes, pretty putrid. Usual sort of commercialist. Cut it out."

Her friend mourned the affront.

"I can't hold a man, my dear, somehow. They're all over you one minute, and then they fade away. It's so beastly disloyal."

Miss Gasson applied ice.

"Does one want to claim a sort of perpetual copyright in one person? Not under modern conditions. Fancy the whole world all and always Allabaster."

"But there are different ways of doing things."

"Oh, the fellow's just a stock-jobber. You hadn't lent him any money?"

Mrs. Pym did not confess to her attempt at a loan. She digressed.

"I'd got that new frock for to-night. Oh—I'm fed up with Rome. It's too noisy, too much jazz. I shall go on to Taormina or Palermo. The kid's fit to travel. I feel I want a rest."

Miss Gasson sat on the edge of her bed and considered the situation. She, too, would not complain of a little solitude, but—personally—she had not exhausted Rome. She said so.

"I think I shall stay on here. Try six weeks in Sicily, my dear. I believe the Hygeia at Palermo is marvellous. And that place at Taormina—the San Niccolo—is quite all there. And there's Ætna—and all that."

She smoked her cigarette.

"I'm not quite through with Rome. Probably I'll follow you on to Taormina, if I'm feeling like a lemon."

But she was not wholly out of sympathy with Mr. Allabaster,

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who at the financial moment had eluded those predatory little hands. In fact she might play at copycat, but with a little more subtlety and grace. She had abused the man. Well, of course, you had to help in your partner's show, and back her bill for her, and join in the chorus. All that made life a little more fluid and easy. And in a month Diana would have another arrow on her bow-string, and some semi-antique stag would be shot through the heart.

II

Elsie heard the news. They were going to Taormina next week. Sally was fit to travel, and an English doctor resided at Taormina, and Mrs. Pym had wired for rooms at the Hotel San Niccolo.

The curtain was to be rung down on Rome.

And Mr. Henry Vane? Presumably he would remain on in Rome, taking his Italian lessons, and patrolling the Forum, and becoming more and more the connoisseur of Græco-Roman art.

She was sorry. Yes, most certainly she was sorry. Mr. Vane might be queer and elusive, invisible one day, and diffidently visible the next with flowers or a box of chocolates for Sally. She was not completely conscious of the fact that her colour came and went in the presence of Mr. Vane, and certainly she was not conscious of the fact that these colour changes were reflected inwardly and elsewhere. Always he was so quiet, so controlled, and when on those rare occasions they came in contact, he seemed to open a door gently and close it again just as gently. He did not remain with her in that world of reality for more than a moment.

Yet she had a feeling that no person she had ever met was more real. There seemed to be some intense and real poignancy at the back of him. It was as though he screened and concealed some very bright and fatal light, and that on occasions gleams of it escaped

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without his meaning them to do so. He was cloaked and masked, but not in the part of the villain. She had seen him sitting with a queer little compassionate smile on his face, while feeding the sparrows in the Borghese Gardens. Her feeling about him was that he went softly through the day as though afraid of hurting people.

Meanwhile, the disappearance of Mr. Allabaster had left Mrs. Pym posing at somebody who was not there; both frock and model were out of fashion for the moment and were removed from the shop window and replaced by a creation that was more domestic and suburban. Mrs. Pym became the mother, and the interlude left Elsie with a little more leisure.

"I'll take the child out this morning."

She became snappy and suspicious towards Elsie, as though Elsie had been attempting to filch from her the dear child's affection. Mother and daughter would go out together and be seen together, the child with a small arm in a sling, the mother sweetly solicitous. Mrs. Pym was playing at being good, just as Sally played at being good, and if Mrs. Pym put on fancy-dress the child had no belief in Father Christmas. She knew exactly when her mother was all dressed up, and that was just the difference between Mrs. Pym and Elsie: Summer wore herself, Mrs. Pym a series of disguises.

As often as not they came back wrangling, and Sally with the impertinence of a child who had had the best of it. She had found her mother out, just because her mother was a copy of her small self. Mrs. Pym showed off; everything was dressed up for the effect, and somehow Sally seemed to understand that Elsie did not dress up.

But one of these hours of leisure found Elsie in a tram on the way to the Porta San Paolo, and the Protestant Cemetery. Before

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leaving Rome she wanted to see Keats's grave and the stone under which Shelley's ashes were buried. The Pyramid of Cestius thrust a grey wedge into the sky, and the cypresses of the cemetery were like dark and cloaked figures, mute and motionless. She entered, and was wandering round the little paths between the graves in her search for John Keats, when she met Vane.

He came upon her quite suddenly from behind a group of cypresses, and both of them stood still and stared at each other with an unsmiling seriousness. Vane's hand went to his hat. And suddenly she had a feeling that he was afraid of her.

But how strange!

She said: "I've come to see Keats's grave. Perhaps you can tell me where it is?"

Yes, he could tell her, and then he hesitated, and with a curious and unsure glance at her suggested that he should show her the way.

"It is quite near, over by the moat."

He led the way, and when they reached the grave he stood looking at her with that same air of hesitation.

"Perhaps you would like to be alone?"

Her glance was more certain than his.

"No. I don't want to drive you away. Didn't Shelley write something about this place?"

Vane had the eternal Baedeker in his overcoat pocket. He produced it, and standing rather like a priest about to read the burial service, turned over the pages.

"Yes. Here it is.

'It might make one in love with death,
To think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.'

Elsie was looking at the stone. Poor Keats, smothered in the

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spring of his year, and lying with those bitter words carved above his head! She was aware of Vane putting the book away, and looking as tall and as detached as one of the cypresses.

"Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

She repeated the words as though dropping nine precious stones into the palm of her hand while she reflected upon them, and the colour and the significance of their beauty.

"That seems the saddest thing of all, that he shouldn't have known."

The fingers of Vane's right hand were fiddling with the flap of an overcoat pocket. It had got itself tucked in, and he was putting it straight.

"Some people expect too much."

Her eyes observed his face.

"Just how?"

"Oh well, most of us have our names writ in water. We make no moan about it. Why should we? The obscure, the unimportant. Think of the unknown dead in the War."

Her eyes and mouth grew poignant.

"Were you in the War?"

He nodded. "Yes, a part of it," and his face seemed to flinch.

She wondered. She remembered that poem of Shelley's, the sensitive plant, a thing that closed its petals when touched. But could a man be so sensitive and vulnerable, and if so—why? And—after all—she knew so little about men, and even less about this particular man.

She became gently careful.

"It is a sweet place. Where is Shelley?"

He showed her Shelley's grave, but with the air of a man who was consumed by some secret restlessness; she did not linger, and

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they went back in the tram together. It was even noisier than most trams and replete with Romans, but between the grindings of the mechanism she managed to tell him that Mrs. Pym was leaving Rome.

He looked startled.

"Oh! Going back to England?"

"No. To Taormina."

He sat with his hands resting on his knees, and his eyes fixed on the handle of a Roman woman's basket.

"Beautiful place—I believe. When are you going?"

"On Tuesday."

"I hope you'll enjoy it."

III

When he went to his room that night, Vane stepped out on to the balcony and stood leaning against the rail. Rome had put on her black velvet and her spangles, and a thousand taxis might be blowing their little trumpets, but Vane was thinking of other things. He had come suddenly to one of those moments of dreadful loneliness when the separateness of self becomes conscious of the apartness of all those other selves. Humanity was but one man. All those other men were but shadows to each essential, separate self. And he remembered that once or twice during the War he had stood in some sodden trench with a thin fog covering the ground and the stars mercilessly bright above, and felt this same dreadful loneliness, and that men were but beads strung along a string.

He looked down into the spreading darkness of the Borghese. It made him think of the sea, some obscure gulf on an unknown shore, and this building was a cliff, his room a hole in the face of that cliff. There were other niches occupied by other living crea-

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tures, but each creature was as separate as its niche, walled in a little cell of self-absorption.

The sea. It suggested something, the title of a book that he had read as a boy. "Ships that Pass in the Night." Yes, he was just such a ship, but his ship carried no lights, and had no course set for any port. He was just a derelict adrift. He could flash no signals, nor receive them.

He half turned and looked at that other balcony. He could see the dim patterning of its ironwork like a little cage attached to the wall. Was she, too, in a cage?

But she was going to Taormina. Of course! What concern was it of his? A ship that passed in the night! And he would remain in Rome pottering round museums and among ruins and memories, yes, just like an old man who had outlived his generation, a dead man among the living.


And suddenly he knew that he wanted to live. The man in him cried out in the dreadful silence of his loneliness. He wanted to touch and be touched, just as he had yearned in the War for woman and some corner of the familiar world, a house, a street, some simple landscape, even a few flowers.

He let his elbows rest on the iron rail, and covered his face with his hands.

What could he do?

Go into that room, undress, turn off the lights, sleep, forget.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE lady of No. 27, Pulteney Street carried up Mrs. Summerhays' tea-tray, and with it a letter, one of those bi-weekly dispatches which were written in Elsie's bedroom and posted in Rome. Mrs. Summerhays was sitting in the half-darkness in front of a very small fire, but since London was in one of its wet and muggy moods, the smallness of the fire did not matter.

The lady of the tea-tray might also have been described as wet and muggy. She owned one of those moist and husky voices that are as persistent as a dripping tap. Her style of conversation was intimate and affable, a kind of hoarse whisper, sibilant and suggesting surreptitious habits.

"All in the dark, my dear? I've brought you a letter with your muffin. Yes, it's the right sort of letter."

Mrs. Bloom "my deared" everybody, and everything, perhaps because she was always a little maudlin and blessing God for Mr. Hopgood round the corner and Mr. Hopgood's grocer's licence; but if Mrs. Bloom's mental mirror was a little smeary and

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reflecting certain rosy patches that met and kissed on the bridge of Mrs. Bloom's nose, it had the virtue of cheerfulness. Life could be a dreary business in these northern cities, and Mrs. Bloom would say: "I do like to have the lights lit and something warm inside me," so Mrs. Bloom and the Fulham Road understood each other. December ceased to be a little less dreadful, with the shop windows becoming coloured, just as though the bleached stomach of each shop flushed and warmed itself with the juice of the grape.

Mrs. Mary liked Mrs. Bloom as she was, kindly and slightly fuddled, and "my dearing" the whole world, for Mrs. Mary could understand lonely women warming themselves at other fires, but she did wish Mrs. Bloom would not force muffins upon her.

"You know I like them, but—"

"But you eat no more than a bird, and it's all nice and buttery. I get 'em from a man who's made 'em for thirty years—real old-fashioned muffins. Why, your fire's nearly out."

"It's so warm to-day."

"Yes, it is that muggy and stuffy. Believe me, I came over quite funny in the middle of the afternoon when I was doing my ironing. The doctor always says my heart ain't what it should be."

Mrs. Bloom's heart was a sympathetic organ and ready on all occasions to agree with her that a little tonic would not do either of them any harm.

• "Now, you read your letter, my dear. Yes, I'm going to the pictures at six, Maurice in 'The Love Parade.' Yes, I've seen it twice before. He is a lad is Maurice."

The butteriness of Mrs. Bloom's muffins made the opening and handling of Elsie's letter a delicate business. Mrs. Bloom had tweaked the red plush curtains across the window, and turned on the light, and her round back and rather untidy head disappeared through the doorway. Apparently she met the cat upon the stairs,

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and descended them trailing a frayed skirt and husky endearments.

Mrs. Mary read Elsie's letter, with her handkerchief spread upon her knees because of muffin, and as usual Elsie began by asking questions.

"Did you receive the cheque? Was it all right?"

Yes, Mrs. Summerhays had received the cheque, and Mrs. Pym's bank had honoured it, and a letter to Elsie had been posted to Rome, but the scene had changed from Rome to Sicily.

Elsie asked another question:

"Are you sure the woman is looking after you all right? Do buy some warm undies. You know you always feel the cold."

Mrs. Mary had emerged from one muffin, but the second slab of warm and buttered rubber was beyond her, and not wanting to hurt Mrs. Bloom's feelings she gave the second muffin to the fire. It sizzled and blazed, and Mrs. Summerhays wiped her fingers and supposed that in the future all muffins must be prohibited, for since two had disappeared Mrs. Bloom would persist in doubling the dose.

She returned to Elsie's letter.

"We are at Taormina. Mrs. Pym was tired of Rome, and Sally was able to travel. We are staying at the Hotel San Niccolo, such a quaint place. It used to be a monastery, and it is right on the edge of the cliff. Taormina is lovely."

But in Elsie's letter her mother detected a faintly plaintive note as of regret. "Taormina is lovely," but to Elsie the beauty lacked

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that something, and Mrs. Mary sat with the letter on her knees and gazed at the fire. There was no word in this letter of Mr. Henry Vane, and more than one Roman letter had mentioned Mr. Henry Vane. He had appeared under the title of "My Balcony Friend," and had played a part in the affair of Sylvia's broken arm. "Mr. Vane was so kind. He got a car and drove over to Frascati. I have never forgiven the woman for not coming back that night." Yes, Elsie was as serious as ever, and her mother supposed that if ever a man came into Elsie's life it would be a desperately serious business for Elsie. But, obviously, Mr. Vane had remained in Rome, and Elsie's letter had a blackbird note.

Was that the reason? And into Mrs. Mary's faded eyes flickered a little smile. Mrs. Bloom and her "Love Parade" and a muffin that had disappeared in sacrificial flame! And Mrs. Mary's own romance, an affair that had put off its frills so prematurely and taken to flannel! Marriage, the eager, fickle boy in man, a month's blaze and then—ashes!

Yes, Elsie would be so very serious about marriage. She would regard it as a sacrament, a surrender, a mysterious comradeship, and how many men were there who could mate with Elsie's seriousness? There might be such wounding.

Mrs. Summerhays folded up the sheets and tucked them back into the envelope. She kept all her daughter's letters dated and in order and fastened together by a rubber band. They were put away in a little old attaché case that had belonged to Elsie's father.

Mrs. Mary lay back in her chair and closed her eyes. She hoped that Mrs. Bloom would be so full of her Maurice that she would forget to come up and recover the tea-tray. Mrs. Mary was a very tired woman, and a sick woman, and Elsie did not know this. It was just as well that she should not know.

"Taormina is lovely."

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Mrs. Mary fell asleep.

II

Vane arrived at Taormina after dark, and as he stood on the dreary, badly-lit platform and waited for his luggage to be dealt with, he was conscious of a feeling of futility. He said to himself: "I was a fool to come here."

A taxi carried him up the spirals of the cliff road. He had refused to enter the hotel bus, and to be packed in a crate with possible compatriots. "No, a taxi." He was tired and he was irritable, and Taormina and its lights had no magic for him at the moment; the place was mere darkness and dust; a confusion of high walls and vague houses and hysterical corners at which the sudden glare of some other car's headlights blinded you. The taxi bumped and squeaked and complained, and in one narrow place it stopped suddenly like Balaam's ass.

Vane had booked a room at the Girgenti, and his first glimpse of the Hotel Girgenti showed him a stone gateway, a white wall, and a pergola hung with green growth. The taxi's headlights lit up a part of the greenness and a section of very white wall. A porter appeared with polished buttons blinking over a generous paunch.

Vane got out.

"I have a room here. My name's Vane."

He used his Italian, and the porter accepted his Italian and returned it to him. The gentleman's room was ready, and dinner was about to be served.

Vane was shown his room, and it struck him as being overheated and rather dreary. There was too much light and too little atmosphere, and the shutters were closed, and the chauffage made it smell musty. His luggage was brought in. He washed, brushed

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his hair, and went in search of the dining-room.

The dining-room of the Hotel Girgenti and the dinner it gave him lessened his depression. Both were mellow. The room, long and low and not too brightly lit, with its faded colours and frescoes suggesting a kind of pagan and Pompeian dimness, seemed to despise all glare and chatter. There were not more than six other people in the room, for it was early in the season. Vane's table was in a corner. The little waiter who served him was smooth and unaggressive. He ordered half a bottle of Barrolo, and the wine was as smooth as the service.

He observed his fellow clients—three elderly Englishwomen, two Americans (husband and wife), and a solitary German. They were strangers, mere figures at white-clothed tables, shadowy people who did not crowd upon his consciousness. He filled his glass a second time, and as he raised it the colour of the wine had a limpid beauty. Life seemed less futile, and he himself less of a fool.

Afterwards he went back to his room, and since it seemed to him more stuffy than ever, he turned off the chauffage, opened the windows and threw back the shutters. He discovered that he had a balcony, and that the hollow of the night had ceased to be confused and obscure. A full moon was rising over the sea and as he stepped out on to the balcony he seemed to arrive in another world. The ground fell away steeply. He could distinguish a terrace and a garden, and a great grove of cypresses whose shadows lay upon the stones of the terrace. Everything was still, and far below him at a bottom of a vast chasm the sea showed him a silver path that led straight towards the moon. The night air had a cold, clear freshness.

He stood and savoured it all, and the mystery of its beauty seemed part of some other mystery.

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He heard a voice within him saying: "She—is here."

III

Life was not being very kind to Elsie, and was on its way to other unkindnesses.

The Hotel San Niccolò had recently been rejuvenated, and like some sedulous worldling had gone into retreat to have its countenance raised, a double chin removed, and wrinkles dealt with, and had emerged monkeyishly young and somehow horrible. All the old faded, pleasant graces had been falsified. San Niccolò had been bathed and barbered and brought up to date, supplied with running water in the bedrooms, a jazz band, a cocktail bar, and other amenities. And with all its new garnishings and daubings and glitter it had attracted to itself the unhappily disillusioned who clung to the illusion that youth was still possible.

Elsie had a wretched little room that looked out on a yard, and below her were the kitchen quarters, odours, and much noise. She could catch some of the chatter from below, and sometimes she understood it, which was unfortunate, for it had the greasiness of the kitchen. Frequently it had reference to the guests, and embraced all the signs of the Zodiac, crab, bull, goat, the old virgin with the golden head.

On the third day someone opened Elsie's trunk and stole from it all her ready cash, two hundred and thirty-three odd lire. She appealed to Mrs. Pym, and Mrs. Pym complained to the management, and the management shrugged its shoulders.

"Valuables should be deposited with us."

Mrs. Pym agreed with the management, and placing some of her jewellery in the hotel safe, hinted broadly to Elsie that she was a fool.

"What can you expect with dagoes about the place?"

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Moreover, the feud between mother and daughter had become open and unrestrained. Each day there was a fracas, and Elsie became no-man's-land across which the combatants fired shots and flung bombs. Sally was in one of her impossible phases, and very active after a period of quiescence.

Elsie appealed to her.

"Sally, you mustn't speak to your mother like that. And before people, too. It's quite horrible."

Sally's retort was instant.

"She's not my mother. I've thought it all out. You're going to be my mother, Summer."

"My dear, you don't understand."

"Yes, I do. Mother wants men—not me!"

The inward Elsie shuddered, for Sally's crude assertion was no mere sophistication. It was true, and becoming unpleasantly true to Elsie. Taormina seemed to have got into Mrs. Pym's blood, and the San Niccolo was sort of super monkey-house in which elderly apes made merry. It was full of mature bright young things of both sexes, who remained up till two in the morning and danced as though the plague was in the air. Some of them chased each other up and down corridors and threw sponges and stole each other's pyjamas.

Elsie's serious soul was shocked, for though the sensationalism of the San Niccolo could be studied through glasses of various colours, and Elsie had begun by seeing it as mere silliness, she did not continue to see it as such. For, though Elsie was not a very subtle judge of what was harmless fooling and what was not, she had her intuitions. She knew that someone had said: "To understand everything is to forgive everything," but she was not so near the pavement as to know that she might be expected to condone the turgidities of certain old men. The virtuous maiden has

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vanished to play with the fairies, and in her stead the world has the young Amazon who can handle her weapons, but Elsie's armament was not up to date.

He was bald, and he had a very artificial set of teeth, and he smiled much and possessed a wife who was an invalid and spent a great part of life deciding to stay in bed. His name was Dashwood. His skin had a dustiness, and was somehow suggestive of brown bread. He danced, he bathed, he played tennis, and that highly artificial smile glistened in the Sicilian sunlight.

He began by attempting to make friends with Sally. He was the sort of succulent old ass who, in spite of some measure of sensual cunning, had no understanding of the child and of that which a child can sometimes comprehend. He postured and babbled like the stage conjurer before the pebble-blue eyes of Sally. He was the sort of fellow who had a bag full of tricks and of funniness, and who produced them like rabbits out of a hat.

Actually, in a corner of the San Niccolo garden, with a lemon tree offering him the most acid of warnings, he had the effrontery to try the handkerchief game on Sally, and pretend that his middle finger was an old lady in a white cap and nightdress.

"Now, this is Mrs. Brown, a very, very old lady, and she's just going to bed, and she's got no teeth—"

Sally said: "Don't be silly. Everybody's got teeth. Even old men have got china teeth, and they put them in and take them out."

Her blue gaze fixed itself on Mr. Dashwood's dentures. His smile became a little more artificial, but it endured.

"You know too much, young lady."

Sally felt provoked.

"Do you put yours in a—"

Elsie made haste to intervene.

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"Sally, dear, let's play the guessing game. I dare say Mr. Dashwood knows it."

"Of course I do."

His smile was Elsie's. He was not wholly a fool. Sundry severe rebuffs had taught him to eschew the very bright young things, and to concentrate on the thirties and upon the editions that were apt to be left on the shelves.

"Thought-reading? What about it?"

Elsie, knowing her Sally, felt the ground to be perilous.

"No—I'm rather shy."

"How exquisite," said Mr. Dashwood's smile, and he wondered why the child stared at him.

Sally plopped it out.

"Ages? You can't guess Summer's age?"

Mr. Dashwood became waggish and gallant.

"Oh, can't I! Twenty-seven, and she doesn't look it. How's that? Middle stump, what!"

Sally surveyed him.

"Not so bad. Now—I'll guess yours. You're quite old, old enough to be Summer's father. Sixty-one. Middle stump, what!"

Mr. Dashwood appeared to laugh heartily. This child was both discomposing and decomposing. Almost she put you in your coffin.

It was he who changed the subject.

"No, it's not quite as bad as that. You should see me dance the polka! You ought to come and dance, Miss Summerhays."

Elsie confessed that she did not dance very well; she had so little practice.

"The remedy is obvious. Oh, by the way, have you and Miss Blue Eyes had tea at the café on the Corso? There's a funny little man who plays the guitar—pong-pong, and another funny little

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man who plays the mandolin—ping-ping. Supposing we all go and have tea there.”

Sally jumped to it.

“Yes, let’s.”

She was intrigued by Mr. Dashwood. She was sure that he could be quite as funny as the little man at the café, and quite as unconsciously so. Sally could visualize him performing on a comb, with a piece of paper wrapped round it.

“Yes, let’s.”

Little Delilah that she was, she allowed Mr. Dashwood to put on the white wig of beneficence and hold her by the hand. She had Mr. Dashwood summed up and sentenced.

“Yes, do let’s go, Summer.”

Almost she produced dimples and the voice of the dove, and though Elsie felt vaguely disturbed in the presence of Mr. Dashwood, she had no valid excuse to offer.

The gay old fellow seemed to flap his wings.

“Oh, not a bit of it. I like to see people enjoy themselves. Now, how many cakes can you kill, young lady?”

Sally’s lips moved. Her impulse was to retort: “Sixty-one,” but she was saving up things for Mr. Dashwood. She behaved like the dream child, and Elsie wondered.

IV

But imperceptibly Taormina became impregnated with Dashwood, or “Mr. Damgood,” as Sally had christened him, vague odours of vinegar and stale brown bread, and Elsie was troubled. The atmosphere of the San Niccolo became surreptitious. She found this bald-headed merchant waylaying her in all sorts of places, and the glisten of his amatory smile waiting for her round corners. He even made himself pleasant to Mrs. Pym, who hap-

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pened to have no appetite for that sort of man, and who referred to him more or less in public as "That stale old guy."

And Taormina was beautiful. It was all the more beautiful to Elsie because it had followed after Rome, and she had brought with her to this Sicilian town a little bitter-sweet bud that might have opened in the sun. Life was not being easy for her, and the sea and sky seemed more deeply blue. If she looked in her secret mirror she saw a mystery of stars and moonlit trees, and a shadowy self that walked in those secret places, and listened and was sad. Everything was so beautiful, and everything hurt, not with a pain that provoked restlessness, but with strange tremors of regret. Her mood was just like an English spring, green and gradual and full of the singing of birds, and of an infinite sadness. It was never as green as you wished, or a bitter wind blew, and even while your hands reached out to the sweet, raw beauty of it, it had passed.

She wanted to be alone, and living in the Hotel San Niccolo was rather like camping in a railway station that had been given over to musical comedy. Her mood was for solitude. She would slip away to the ruins of the Græco-Roman theatre above the town and, sitting high up on the grass, gaze and gaze. It was like being in a picture, or in a beautiful crystalline, yet vapoury, world in which all the loveliness was both vivid and blurred. The sea, the sky, the immensity of the rocky coast, white foam, blue loops of water, lemon groves, cypresses, the confused and interlocked pattern of the little southern town. And there was Ætna, that solitary, menacing monster.

She could be happy here, happy and sad and alone.

Then, one afternoon that glistening smile followed her to her Olympus, and sat down beside her on the grass, and began to be surreptitiously sympathetic.

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Wasn't Mrs. Pym a rather difficult woman? And a governess's life, etc.?

And suddenly something in Elsie rebelled. This old man! That the beauty of her secret world should be invaded! That life should hold her so cheap!

She did not remember what he said to her. The world seemed to be all bald head and glistening teeth. He was suggesting that she should come and dance that evening, enjoy herself, be young. Young with him!

She did dance that evening, as though to spite herself, and to make a mockery, a macabre foxtrot of the might-have-been. And Mr. Dashwood squeezed her hand.

She discovered in herself an unexpected piece of Sally. Her impulse was to slap the gentleman's face, and to say to him: "Go up, thou bald-head, go up to bed."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



*I*F the Hotel San Niccolo assured Elsie that life was a silly, flashy affair, and that a young woman should seize her opportunities and demand her ten per cent, the soul of Elsie protested. No, life was not like that. There were things that mattered, those unexplainable loyalties, the bloom on the fruit, your sense of wonder, your craving to love and be loved. Besides, there was such a thing as beautiful behaviour, and a fastidiousness that transcended Rome in its cult of the bath.

Elsie believed in God, and there had been occasions when Elsie and her mother had debated the problem of God, and Mrs. Summerhays, a gentle sceptic, had asked Elsie to explain the mystery.

"Oh, it's just my feeling about things. Words don't carry one very far, do they?"

Mrs. Summerhays had said that all your spiritual strivings carried you to the bottom of the dark cliff, and left you there, and that there was no rope dangling.

"Oh, no, I don't agree. Isn't my very feeling about things—a

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rope? What I mean is—can't these feelings of ours be just as actual as trees and the sea? They are meant. It's something that is being impressed upon my consciousness."

"You mean—that because you feel God—God exists?"

"Yes, that's it. And why shouldn't it be so? When I say that there is something in me that is hungry in another sort of way, and is given a mysterious sort of food, why shouldn't this be considered just as real as my body's hunger and the dinner I eat? What I mean is—I can feel things that I can't see. And I feel that I'm meant to feel them."

Mrs. Summerhays had understood.

"Yes, I suppose one can't get much further than that. We may be being led by an invisible thread."

But Elsie had to allow that there were times when the thread became very tenuous, and got itself ravelled and tangled in a world that was Dashwood & Pym. The phenomena of life appeared so fortuitous. Your teleological scheme was no more than a cat's-cradle, with its threads vibrating to instinct. So many people were just part of the show—spangles, artificial silk, wigs, etceteras. Yet, Elsie could not ignore the realities of the Pym world, for it was a world that was as actual as the meat in a butcher's shop, and Mr. Dashwood was most unpleasantly real. He was suggesting solitary walks, scrambles up the hills. He would show her D. H. Lawrence's villa, and act as her personal cicerone to Robert Hichens's "The Call of the Blood."

Elsie's mood was otherwise. She shrank from these very crude realities. She wanted to get away into that other and more mysterious world, and utter her secret credo. "I believe in—" But, in what did she believe? In the inherent goodness of things, in a personal love that could be impersonally wise, both passionate and compassionate, and enduring? She wanted to be able to feel

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like a child, or as she had felt about things in her childish days, and not as Sally felt about them. She wanted to believe in people, to assure herself that they were good and kind and disinterested, and that all kisses were not of the Judas order. She wanted to discover her God in man.

For Elsie's thread had got itself rather tangled in a dark thicket, and she was feeling a little bewildered and afraid. She was so like a victim in this thicket of realities, just a governess, an odd woman who was anybody's game. The *intelligentsia* might orate upon the emancipation of woman, but Elsie was not emancipated. She wanted to feel secure, to hold on tight to some other creature just as she clung to her God. She was ready to sit softly in the sunlight and adore. Earning your living and being bold as brass in a world that was Pym might be Amazonian and up-to-date, but Elsie would prefer to shelter behind somebody else's shield.

So, like the trembling nymphs she sought her solitude, and eluded a possible "Mr. Damgood" by slipping out of the garden gate and taking the vicolo that led up to the Corso. It was five minutes past three, and the bells of Taormina had just ceased from their childish clamour, and a dog was scratching himself on a doorstep. The grey cobbles ascended between high houses, and someone was practising the saxophone. A Sicilian woman leaned out from an upper window and emptied a pail. There was an oily, fragrant smell of cooking.

She arrived on the Corso; she turned to the right, and was within ten yards of the English Library and Tea Rooms when she became aware of a man. He was standing hesitant in front of the English Library; he appeared to be reading a notice. The invisible thread offered itself to Elsie's fingers. She fumbled at it. Her impulse was to turn and run.

But she was seen, and as he came towards her, she was aware

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of his face, and of something in his eyes. He was glad to see her, glad and afraid, and she too was afraid.

"Mr. Vane."

He seemed to find it difficult to speak to her, perhaps because her face was as naked to him as his was to her.

"Oh—I thought I would come and look at Taormina. I arrived last night. Where are you?"

"At the San Niccolo."

"I'm at the Girgenti. It's very beautiful here."

And Elsie's world had regained its beauty. He had wanted to come to Taormina, and she had wanted him to come.

II

Where was she going? Oh, anywhere. She was free for an hour, and she confessed that she was not fond of Taormina's Main Street with its tortoiseshell and amber, its mock antiques and its quite impertinent prices. The Corso was a hen-run for old chanti-cleers like Mr. Dashwood to strut in. She preferred some measure of solitude, and a glorious gazebo up aloft, and if Mr. Vane was interested in the Classic past, well, the ruins of the Græco-Roman theatre were unique.

He had discovered it that morning, but he did not tell her so. From the green brow of the hill you could look down on the cypresses and the fruit trees of the Hotel Girgenti. He had spent an hour among the ruins, looking through clefts in the old red brickwork at the sea, and not troubling to reconstruct that which was dead. He was a live man, and in the grass-grown orchestra his own self had been the stage.

"Show me. Will you?"

She still glowed, and was a little confused.

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"I'd love to. It's a sweet place. Just like the place that Shelley wrote about."

They went down the Corso together, and suddenly she was afraid of meeting Mr. Dashwood. But how absurd! As though "Mr. Damgood" could matter on such an occasion. She could explain him to Vane; she had a feeling that she could explain anything to Vane. He was not any woman's man, just as she was not any man's woman.

"How's Sally?"

"Oh, much as usual. The arm is quite all right."

"And the behaviour?"

He was smiling, and she realized that to her his smile was new country, quite unexplored. Hitherto she had experienced his infinite seriousness, a personality that stood apart like a tree. She gave him a quick, upward glance.

"Oh, quite bearable."

"You're not punning?"

As if she would!

"Sally and I get on quite well now."

"Isn't that a tribute to you?"

"Oh—I won't claim that. I've tried very hard. I suppose it's rather like training a puppy."

"Or a young tigress. And Mrs. Pym?"

Elsie's face fell, and he noticed it. He was alive to the faintest flicker of an eyelash.

"Just Mrs. Pym. It's quite gay at the San Niccolo."

"Gay. I see. Like that. Not very appealing to you."

"No, not very."

They had arrived at the gate and the path leading up to the theatre, and Elsie realized that she had come without any money. She had been hoarding two five-lire notes and a few centesimi ever

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since the purloining of her petty cash.

"I'm afraid I have forgotten my money."

But Vane was paying the official at the gate.

"My affair, please."

She was still a little breathless over this most trivial incident.

"I had nearly all my money stolen the other day."

"What, in the hotel?"

"Yes, from my bedroom."

"What a shame!"

She was smiling again.

"Oh, well, one tries to think that someone wanted it very badly, more than I did. I can understand that."

"Can you?"

"Yes. People must be rather desperate—sometimes. I don't believe that people do that sort of thing—because they want to."

"Circumstances."

"Oh, yes. Don't you think so?"

He did not answer her for a moment.

"Yes, we're more often pushed than pulled."

They ascended by way of the steps, and Vane paused from time to time as though to look at the view, but also because the climbing of these steps with her was part of an allegory. And she was still a little breathless, and when she turned with him to look at the hills the afternoon sunlight lay in her eyes. He could say to himself that in the beginning he had begun to love her because of her eyes, because of their dark seriousness, their moments of bewilderment, their honesty, and to-day they were full of the Sicilian sunlight.

"I wonder how many people this place could hold?"

"It's immense, isn't it? The old brickwork is so beautiful."

"Just a provincial theatre, with a sky for a roof."

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They passed along the great upper gallery where the walls still showed the springing of the brick vaulting, and Vane described to himself and to her the pagan holiday crowd flowing in full colour here.

"Probably—you could buy sweets and flowers, and cool drinks. And perhaps girls sprayed scent over you."

Her eyes lit up.

"If we had H. G. Wells' time-machine we could see it all."

"Yes. Would you like to be back in those days?"

"Oh, no. I should be a futurist ghost, shouldn't I?"

"Hopelessly lost and lonely."

The grass had been dried by the sun and they sat down on the little plateau beside the ruins, and looked down into the deeps. And she began to tell him about the Hotel San Niccolo, and its elderly restlessness. Wasn't it strange that people should bring their feverish selves to such a place as this, and insist upon a cabaret-cocktail show in Sicily? He sat with his knees drawn up, listening to her as though he could listen to her for ever after years of inarticulate silence.

"But isn't that our fate?"

"You mean—we take our selves everywhere?"

"Fortunately or unfortunately. I still see you as Miss Elsie Summerhays—even in Sicily."

"Do you?"

"Fortunately—yes."

Her face was tranquil and happy. It seemed to her that he had ceased to be a stranger, and that he was a different person from the man she had met in Rome. She felt at ease with him, even while she was conscious of him as her lover. She could tell him things; she did not mind being watched by him; she was living in a new and exquisite world. He made her feel strangely secure, more

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sure of herself, because, somehow, she was so sure of his manhood. Strong and silent. But, of course, the cult of the strong and the silent man had been overdone, and even suburbia laughed at it, but all the same she liked to think of him as strong and silent. She was a creature of tendrils, and she knew it.

She asked him about the Hotel Girgenti.

"I suppose it is quieter than ours?"

"Just six people—and myself."

Gazing at the sea she thought how restful it all was. And yet how little she knew of him. Surely, before long, he would begin to tell her something of himself, what his life had been; and how gladly she would listen. No man had ever talked to her intimately of himself, and this man was so different from other men. She thought of Mr. Dashwood, and her sensitive innocence exulted.

She said, "You don't like crowds."

"Do you?"

"I loathe them. They make me feel paralysed and voiceless. You seem to lose your self."

"Or find—nothing but your self."

She sat pondering those last words of his, and suddenly all the bells of Taormina began to ring, and she realized that it was four o'clock, and that Sally would be hers. She drew up her knees, and her hands touched the grass.

"Four o'clock! I had no idea—"

She rose and he with her. They were close together, and yet she had a feeling that he had drawn a little apart from her. The sun was going down. *Ætna* loomed.

"I take the child out for a short walk after tea."

"Where?"

"Oh, up and down the Corso. We looked at the shops, especially the jewellery shops. That's Sally."

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"Not you?"

"Perhaps something of me, too."

As they moved away towards the steps he had the air of a man confronting some poignant choice.

"Could we repeat this? I mean—if you—wouldn't be bored?"

He saw the colour come quickly into her face.

"I'd love to. I often come and sit here."

"About the same time?"

"Yes."

They went down the steps together.

III

Vane dined alone at the Hotel Girgenti, and to the other six he may have appeared as a solitary and serious person who had the air of not wishing to be approached. One of the English women had decided that he looked like an Oxford don, but since she had never set eyes on a specimen of *Homo Academicus*, her opinion left Vane where he was. He had brought no book with him to the table. He exchanged a few suave banalities with his waiter, and allowed each course to be brought to him as though nothing on a plate had substance. Obviously, the gentleman was absorbed, detached. He helped himself twice to salt, and forgot to drink his wine.

The little waiter, who was a student of humanity, would have said that the gentleman was either worried about business or in love. A little old, perhaps—for that. But was a man ever too old for the foolish passion? Moreover, a client's facial expression could not be taken too seriously. It might suggest that he was going to cut his throat, or somebody else's throat, when he was merely preparing to complain of the cooking, or eating with an ear laid to the mother earth of a dyspeptic stomach.

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Vane refused dessert. He threw his napkin on the table, got up, and walked out of the room as though late for some affair, and the waiter observed to a confrère that the gentleman appeared troubled. He had left his wine untouched. Yes, indigestion—probably. These long, serious people lacked essential oil. The waiter cleared the table, and behind a screen drank Vane's wine for him. It was good wine, and Jacopo was in love. Why not? Being in love should be a jocund business. You sang; you would sing all the time if you could, when you polished your boots and buttoned your braces. Love, love, deep chest notes, gestures, joy! The lady was a baker's daughter in the Vicolo Garibaldi, and she was consenting.

Vane opened his shutters and stood on the balcony. There was the same moon, but half of it was in the sea, and looking like a floating dome of light. There were the same cypresses, the same shadows, a little lengthened and touching the white wall. Somewhere a dog was baying the moon. Poor, stupid, love-lorn beast!

But had he any right to feel contemptuous towards the dog? Contempt died on such a night as this, and was forgotten like the thin, finicky music of the posturing young moderns, and the dog's salute to the moon was more understandable. Meanwhile, the satellite had lifted itself out of the sea, and hung there like a huge half-crown or five-lire piece.

Heads or tails? Could one trust such a choice to the spin of a coin?

"Heads—I tell her. Tails—I disappear."

But the whole urge of him was towards the telling, for would she not understand? She seemed so different from other women. She had gentleness, compassion, kind eyes. He could imagine himself sitting on the grass beside her, confessing everything, justifying nothing, save that he could say, "That was the sort of

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man I was then. That was what the War did to some of us. The incredible savage egotism of such an act! I am not like that now."

Would she be shocked? Oh, no doubt, but he would say, "I have told you this because I had to tell you. In the beginning I did not mean to tell you. It seemed impossible. But now there is something greater in me than fear. Can you believe me?"

Yes, he had a feeling that her compassion would rise above the horror of the past. She would understand all that he had suffered, the remorse, his realization of the savage futility of violence, those long, silent frozen years. He wanted to pour himself out to her almost like a child at somebody's knee. He wanted her soft, succouring hands, her healing glances.

He would tell her. It was becoming inevitable that he should tell her.

For he had begun to hope. Was it not possible that he might begin life over again with a woman like Elsie Summerhays? He would change his name; they could travel; there would be an end of this most bitter loneliness. But also, he wanted to give to Elsie, to make life good for her, and what would he not give to a woman who chose as her dear comrade a man such as he was? He wanted to give to her, and go on giving. Life should spend itself.

At the San Niccolo Elsie put on her one pretty frock, the frock that made her feel a little happy with herself. It was more than yesterday's frock, even as she was more than yesterday's woman. They became each other in this new becoming. She had given twenty minutes to her hair so that it would overshadow that rather academic forehead.

Going to say good night to Sally she was commended by those two blue eyes.

"Summer, you do look nice."

"Do I, dear?"

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"Summer, you've got a man."

She laughed it off, but she could not laugh off her innocence.

"Perhaps."

"Not—old Damgood?"

"No, old Damgood's a nuisance. I wish—"

Sally nodded a truculent head.

"P'raps I'll do something to Mister Damgood."

Elsie joined the musical comedy crowd. She danced. She danced with Mr. Dashwood—and others. She was sufficiently woman in wishing to experiment upon the male reactions, even upon the doggishness of Dashwood.

"My dear girl—you look marvellous to-night."

His bald head seemed to rouse in her a flicker of mischief.

"Is that so unusual?"

"Oh, come—more so than usual."

Mr. Dashwood squeezed her hand. Did it matter? Almost she felt like returning the pressure. She felt so happy. She was in love, and her love was good.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



*Y*ET, when he came to the edge of his crisis, Vane flinched from it, for the world was so very beautiful during those winter days by the Ionian sea. The sun rose like a ball of fire in the purple east. The air was crystal-clear and windless, the sea and sky equally blue. All sorrow and shame seemed to have gone out of a world that was washed by so tranquil a sea, and warmed by such sunlight.

Moreover, Elsie came to him so innocently, and with such an air of gentle inevitableness. Always he was there first and waiting for her, and her eyes looked at him without guile.

"Another perfect day."

It was her password, and neither of them troubled about its obviousness.

"We are lucky."

Not a cloud in the sky, and the cypresses in the garden of the Hotel Girgenti unvexed by any wind, and Vane said to life: "Give me a few more days such as these. Let us sit in the sun and come nearer to knowing each other. This is my first spring for sixteen years. When the weather changes, I will tell her."

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Yet though the sky was cloudless, that which waited to be told was like his own shadow outlined on the grass, and always he was conscious of it, but Elsie was conscious of no such shadow. Her sense of security was complete, like the sky and the sea, and even Ætna was forgotten.

Her tranquillity troubled him, and each day he found himself more troubled by it. The shadow seemed to enlarge itself and to become a thing of substance. Her very innocence reproached him, for as he came to know the essential, inward Elsie, he was astonished at her innocence. It made him afraid. She was both woman and child, and the child in her was strangely untarnished in spite of the Pym world. She wondered at things, and at the same time they retained for her their reality, a kind of gentle and conventional separateness. She had not merged her values like so many of the moderns. Truth was truth, and white was white, and that which you loved could not deceive.

She took life so seriously, and her very seriousness sat beside him so serenely and so sure. It would not be easy to tell her, and as the days passed the edge of the cliff seemed to grow more abrupt and final. He had thought of blurting the thing out, throwing himself over the edge and trusting to her compassion to bear him up. She would understand, but as he began to sense the delicacy of her reactions, the sensitive threads of her being, he was moved to wonder whether they would stand the strain. She would be too savagely shocked.

He asked himself—could it not be done more gently? He could lead her gradually to divine that chasm in his life so that she should not come upon it too suddenly and shrink away. He must give her time to realize the now and the then.

He began to tell her about his early life, about his mother and their place in the country, and how as a boy he had been rather

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a separative child, a passionate little egoist. No, not bookish, but something of a rebel at school. He had had a mechanical bent; he had been more creative than romantic, interested in the way things worked. He had had a little workshop of his own, and in the early days of flying he had been furiously inspired to make a model aeroplane of his own.

"No, it never flew. It always pitched on its nose and crashed."

Engineering was to be his job. He had chosen it for himself. He had gone up to Cambridge and taken the Engineering Tripos. Afterwards he had spent two years in a northern workshop. Then he had come to London and joined a well known firm. He had expected to be sent out East in charge of the technical side of some big contract.

"I was tremendously keen. I always took things rather too seriously."

Her innocence questioned that.

"Can one take one's job too seriously?"

He tried to broaden the issue.

"I mean—all sorts of things. I was too much at red-heat—perhaps too much in a hurry."

He had been on the edge of the catastrophe. He was about to tell her of his marriage, and how marriage had affected his career. As a husband he had been too much the passionate egoist; he had given up some things, the wrong things, and clutched at others. He had surrendered a big chance for the sake of his marriage, and regretted it, and realized that he had surrendered to an egotism that was more stubborn than his own. His wife had been jealous of his job, and he had always been jealous of other men.

He hinted at some of these things, and then on that most critical day they were interrupted. The superfluous Mr. Dashwood discovered them there, and being piqued, was provocatively genial

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and bald-headed. He attached himself; he sat down on the grass beside them, and made conversation.

"They tell me *Ætna's* due to erupt."

The bells of Taormina chimed four, and Mr. Dashwood pulled out a gold watch, and observed the obvious.

"Four o'clock. Tea-time."

The spell was broken. Elsie was due at the Hotel San Niccolo, and Mr. Dashwood knew it. He walked back with her up the Corso, and his geniality was a little turgid and yellow.

"Who's your friend? Nice person."

"Oh, we met in Rome."

II

The modern world is so noisy that one is justified in assuming that the moderns like their concertos to express the clangor of milk-cans and lorries. If you would be heard above the crowd your cymbals must be of brass, and Mrs. Pym's orchestration was full of brass, and it never muted itself. The musical comedy crowd at the San Niccolo could stand a good deal of noise, and made it, but it was beginning to question the loudness of Mrs. Pym.

Her bedroom was next to that of an old gentleman who played bridge, and though he was a one o'clock in the morning worthy, Mrs. Pym and her accomplices outlasted him by an hour.

The old gentleman complained.

"The woman comes to bed half drunk."

"Easy, John; you'd better be careful."

"I'm damned if I care. You should hear her screaming and cackling in the corridor. They throw things at each other. She bangs her door about three times, and then bangs every other door and drawer in the room. I don't come out here to sleep next to a night-club."

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The old gentleman complained to the management. He demanded another room, and the management was suave and sympathetic. It had its eyes on Mrs. Pym, for though it encouraged gaiety among its clients and gave gala dinners at which old gentlemen wore paper caps and pelted each other and the ladies with balls of cotton-wool, it did expect the fooling to be—just foolish. The old bright things sustained themselves with an abundance of champagne. But this lady with the yellow head was a little too volcanic. She erupted. She had been seen dancing in the corridor swathed in a bath-towel and with a sponge-bag on her head.

In her facetious moments Mrs. Pym had referred to Elsie's hats as "Sponge-bags," but Elsie had become critical of such accessories. There were other eyes, eyes that mattered, and her mirror had an accomplice. Moreover, she had seen a particular hat in a window on the Corso, and she desired that hat in the cause of romance. It was priced at one hundred and fifteen lire, and Elsie's petty cash was almost non-existent. She would have to go to Mrs. Pym and say: "Please, I want some money."

On that disastrous day, at about half-past eight in the morning, she left Sally to finish her breakfast, and went to make her request.

"I'll be back in a minute, dear."

Mrs. Pym's room was on the floor below, and Elsie's head was so full of her own affairs that she forgot that another woman's apartment and private affairs may demand a certain discretion. Someone had left Mrs. Pym's door unlocked, or rather the person who had entered the room a few minutes previously had not been wise as to the need for a locked door. Adonis had carried in the lady's coffee and rolls, and Diana had looked with eyes of approval upon his youth.

Elsie knocked.

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"May I come in?"

Her knocking, her trying of the handle and her salutation were almost simultaneous, and since an unlocked door suggested that you would not be trespassing, she opened the door and walked in. She experienced one moment of stupefaction. The young waiter was sitting on the edge of Mrs. Pym's bed, smoking a cigarette and pouring out the lady's coffee for her.

Elsie fled. She had blurted out an apology—"Oh, I beg your pardon!" But the tableau had reduced her to inarticulate bewilderment. She had felt herself involved in it, defaced by it, made to feel shamefully ridiculous.

She found herself back in Sally's room, and Sally was putting a delicate finish to the meal by an attack upon the sugar-dish. She knew that Summer disapproved of such self-gratification, but on this occasion Elsie had no dogmatism left in her. She sat down mutely and picked up the coffee-pot, forgetting that she was supposed to have finished her breakfast.

The coffee-pot had been drained to the dregs, and it dribbled a few muddy drops into Elsie's cup, and Sally laughed.

"You've had your breakfast, Summer."

"Of course I have, dear."

Sally's laughter rallied her. Assuredly one ought to be able to laugh at mental lapses and indiscretions, for laughter can dissolve and clarify much mother-earth, but Elsie could find no laughter. She was up to her eyes in seriousness. Really, the thing was too repulsive, too utterly cheap.

"You don't look very well, Summer."

"I'm quite all right, dear."

But spiritually she was shivering. She felt nauseated. What a beastly world it could be! Her sensitiveness exaggerated the incident. She had forgotten about the charming little hat in that

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window, but she had not forgotten the sunlight and the hill-side and the sea. She was conscious of a feeling of yearning, of gentle exultation. Oh, yes, that was all so different, so clean and good, and he was so different from all these other people. In secret she held up the romantic illusion like a young girl who hurries to adore, and in adoring discovers beauty.

She recovered herself. She thought: "Perhaps—very soon—I shall be away from all this. How exquisite to be free, and yet not free. He is so different. His life must have been so different. Perhaps to-day he will go on telling me— Oh, my dear, my dear!"

She set about the day's affairs. The sun was shining, and she and Sally would attempt to concentrate upon arithmetic and elementary French under the lemon trees in a corner of the garden. Yes, she had just enough money to pay the official who kept the gate of her garden of dreams. She collected Sally, and exercise books and primers, but Sally and her etceteras were mere objective details lying like pebbles on a beach. Beyond them stretched the subjective sea of a woman's hopes and dreams and tendernesses, the blue infinite of a sentimental mysticism.

The egregious Mr. Dashwood made a studiously casual appearance in their corner, and assumed surprise.

"Hallo! You here! Serious business, what! How do you spell parallel, young lady?"

Sally glared at him.

"Spell it yourself."

Mr. Dashwood beamed falsely.

"Ah, you're hedging. Supposing I offered somebody a five-lire note? Lovely day, Miss Summerhays. Going to the theatre this afternoon?"

Insufferable philanderer, and sly at that! Elsie was abrupt with him.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

"Please. We must be serious."

"I'm interrupting. Well, young lady, how do you spell—"

Sally retorted:

"You look as though you had had a boiled egg for breakfast."

As a matter of fact he had, two of them, and he removed them and himself from Sally's irreverent presence. The child had no manners, no manners at all.

Elsie reverted to French grammar.

"Hateful old man!"

Sally opened her blue eyes rather wide, for it was unusual for Summer to express herself so frankly.

"I know the word for him, Summer—'*cochon*.'"

And Elsie did not contradict her.

III

That afternoon she went wide-eyed to her crisis. She offered her last five-lire note to the official at the familiar gate, and he smiled upon her and refused it.

"The gentleman has paid for two."

Possibly she blushed. She did not mind this middle-aged Italian giving her romance a fatherly benediction. Nothing was prosaic to her on this exquisite afternoon, and an Italian pensioner with the mustachios of a Napoleonic grenadier might be the keeper of her gate of dreams. As she climbed the path and the steps she thought of the morning as a kind of miasma, and this hill-side as a sanctuary between sea and sky. She did not hurry. She could appreciate the exquisite tempo of her deliberation, this up and up like a voice rising, or a lark climbing. Her innocence was complete.

Her lover! She stood in the shadow of one of the red brick walls of the ruin, and observed him. He was sitting on the grass near the edge of the cliff, and he was unaware of her nearness, and for the

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space of some seconds she stood there in secret and possessed him. He was not young, but to her he was neither young nor old. His hair was a little grey at the temples, and it pleased her. Every feature of him was becoming intimately hers, and even the trivial things were lit up by her tenderness. And how utterly romantic it all was—Rome, Sicily, this tranquil, sunlit hill-side.

For a moment her very tenderness became playful. She was tempted to hide behind the sheltering wall and to behave like a child playing at hide-and-seek. "Find me!" But the mood was transient; her seriousness reasserted itself. She was English Elsie on this Sicilian hill, a creature of gentle conventions, posing her reality as in a photograph, and ready to allow that the negative might need a little touching-up.

She walked across the grass, and almost instantly he was aware of her presence. He had been sitting there like some human mechanism kept under tension. His head turned as though some spring had been released. He rose quickly and with a kind of angular rigidity, and stood looking at her.

Her innocence divined no shadow.

"Thank you for paying."

"The fellow told you?"

"Oh, yes, he's quite a friend of ours."

"I'm glad he didn't try to cheat."

But what was the matter with her lover? She might have said that he had the air of a man who had been sitting in a north wind instead of in the Sicilian sunlight. He looked chilled, hunched about the shoulders, and obviously and harshly self-conscious. She began to be aware of an edge of shadow.

"You look—cold."

She noticed that he avoided meeting her eyes.

"Cold? Oh, not a bit. It's quite warm up here. Shall we sit?"

TWO BLACK SHEEP

He waited until she had settled herself. There was more grass between them than usual. He brought out a pipe and a pouch and laid them on the grass. He stared at the sea.

"How's Sally?"

"Quite good to-day. We've actually arrived at vulgar fractions."

"Splendid."

He picked up his pipe as though his hands wanted something to hold.

"I was rather—balked, yesterday."

"You mean by—?"

"I don't know his name. He arrived just when I was going to tell you something."

So that was it! The transient shadow seemed to pass, leaving her eyes and face softly luminous.

"I'm sorry. Rather a tiresome old man. Let's go back to yesterday, if you want to."

She stole a glance at him. He looked quite worn and grey. Was he finding it so difficult to tell her that which was so self-evident?

"I want you to be patient with me."

"Yes, I'll be very patient."

She sat quite still. How very shy and irresolute he seemed, and yet she would rather have had it so, gradual and tentative and mysterious, like the moon rising. Her hand was ready to go out to him. She was waiting to say: "Oh, my dear, I understand."

He took that very word away from her lips.

"I don't think you understand."

"But perhaps I do."

"No, that's not possible. You see, for days I have been on the edge of a cliff."

"Something—so serious?"

"Something—so final."

TWO BLACK SHEEP

He did not look at her, or realize that her face was hazed over with a beautiful soft expectancy. She seemed to dream, eyes half closed, lips faintly tremulous.

IV

He began to tell her.

"What I'm going to say may hurt you. That's the tragedy of this business. I'm not going to justify anything. I only ask you to listen. You may understand, and you may not."

The edge of the shadow came back, the edge of reality that was to eclipse her dream. She turned slightly on the grass as though to watch his face, and the movement worried him.

"No, don't do that. Look at the sea."

The shadow increased. She was beginning to feel a little frightened, but she turned her face to the sea.

"I don't think you could hurt me."

He sat rigid.

"Oh, that depends. It seems that one has to hurt people, the very people—. But let me get it over."

His voice had a harshness. It was as though this revealing of things was like the rending of some fabric, and as she listened her eyes seemed to grow large and bewildered. What was he saying? His words seemed to strike note after note—all of them poignant and harsh—a piling-up of discords. She was conscious of feeling shocked, wounded, dismayed. His swift, fierce phrases. His marriage. "I must have been a savage sort of egoist. I took things at red-heat. I was a jealous beast. You wouldn't understand. No, you couldn't."

Now he was speaking of the War. He had taken that too at red-heat, given up everything. But the War, that most dreadful of illusions! You had rushed into it feeling a noble fellow, and the

TWO BLACK SHEEP

War had got you down in the mud. It had intensified all that was elemental in you—sex, hunger, crude instinct. It had stripped you naked and left you savagely and stubbornly enduring. Having so little left to you, you had desired other things more passionately. The horrible inevitableness of it all, the helplessness—sheep for the slaughter. Yes, out there in the mud some men had modelled little clay idols and called them woman—love—home. However beastly and vile the reality of war might be, life was different at home. And at home they understood what men were suffering, surrendering, yearning for. Poor devils!

He paused. Not once had he looked at her face, nor divined an illusion in ruins.

He went on.

"I got leave. It was after the slaughter at Loos. I was hungry—oh, so hungry—for things. I wanted—I thought. And then—I found that some things could be worse at home than the mud, might be more treacherous. My wife had—"

She was shivering, mute.

"I suppose I saw red. I hadn't got the sense to laugh or be cynical. I hadn't the sense in me then to feel the pity of things, that life isn't a sort of store-cupboard in which the jam waits for you. I wanted to smash. I was like an animal let out of a cage. If I had waited a little longer I should have found life out—just as we found the War out. Futile, horrible violence! But I didn't wait. I killed the fellow. They gave me twenty years."

And suddenly he was aware of her uttering a little protesting cry.

"Oh, stop, stop—please!"

He looked at her. His face cracked in a wincing smile.

"I'm sorry. Yes, it must sound pretty crude and ghastly, but it had to be told."

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His smile grew tragically kind. He was realizing her bewilderment, her horror. She was so much more easily bruised, so much less strong than he had thought. Serious and sweet and conventional, a mere frightened kid.

He spoke very gently to her.

"I'm sorry. And now it's all over, but you had to know. And some day—perhaps—you'll understand."

She had her face in her hands, and she was shaking as he had seen men shake in moments of dreadful fear. He wanted to touch her, help her—but to what ends? He had forgotten that there had been a man in him crying for help.

"Please, it's all over. I didn't want to hurt you like this. Perhaps you would like to go back."

He watched her, with compassion and with secret yearning. Was it so hopeless? Couldn't she give him anything?

She let her hands fall, and almost he could feel her inward shuddering.

"Yes—I think I had better go."

She rose from the grass, giving him one hopeless, frightened, tragic look.

"Please—don't come with me. I'd rather be— Yes, I'm quite all right."

He watched her go, and when she had disappeared behind a mass of old red brickwork, he turned again to the sea. So that was that! Poor kid! He understood and suffered the significance of her panic. She was good, too good, and it occurred to him to wonder whether some child of the streets would not have understood life better, and out of her raw flesh pressed some measure of compassion.

He sat and stared at the sea.

There was no bitterness in him. But the pity of it!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



WHEN Elsie came to the gate, the kind old fellow with the mustachios stood there to bless her.

"A beautiful evening, signorina."

She hurried past him with some of the shocked and shrinking hauteur of a good woman who has been accosted. All the bells of Taormina burst into a jangle of laughter. It was four o'clock, and less than an hour ago she had felt so happy, so sure that God was in his heaven and that all was well with the world.

How horrible life was!

She was out of breath both emotionally and physically. Inevitably she was going back to the Hotel San Niccolo, to the world of Mr. Dashwood and Mrs. Pym, and she hurried like some little stenographer who was ten minutes late and felt fate waiting for her like an ominous, short-tempered chief. Oh, yes, she must hurry along this Sicilian street that was somehow strange and distorted, like a jagged and drugged cubist study. People with green faces and purple hair! The shop-windows seemed to smirk at her, and in passing a particular window she caught a glimpse of the lately coveted hat.

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A red hat!

She shuddered at the redness of everything, and coming to the open space by the cathedral with its terrace and railings, she seemed to collide with a Sicilian sunset and a crowd of loafers—humanity silhouetted against a flaming sky. Even the sunset was red, and she was still breathless and bewildered. Her consciousness was like a conventional white wall upon which some surreptitious youth had scrawled political obscenities in red chalk. Adultery, murder—her hero an ex-convict. How incredibly crude and horrible!

For she was rather like a frightened child crying: "Mother, mother!" The thing had so shocked her that her reactions to the reality were frozen. Oh, he should not have told her, he should not have told her! He should not have let her come to care, and then caused her dream-world to crash like this. So benumbed was she that she was only capable of a pale self-pity. Her sentimental self huddled itself in the clothes of a convention.

Or, her pity was for the moment like a feeble light carried along a darkened street, and illuminating her own figure and the stones beneath her feet. Poor Elsie! She was thinking of herself as poor Elsie. Her pity had not yet warmed and enlarged itself so as to include that other figure. She had run away from her reality in blind and uncomprehending panic.

Meanwhile the San Niccolo and Sally waited for her. She was going back to that other world with its painful inferiorities. She shrank from it. Oh, but she could not go back yet. She must have a little time to readjust her shocked soul, to sort out the old from the new. It was as though she had been asleep and dreaming and a loud voice had shouted: "Wake up, get busy! What are you mooning about?" Almost it was the voice of Mrs. Pym. But she could not go back yet. She walked the full length of the Corso, and

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found herself on the terraced road leading down to the hotel. Again—the sunset, and a deep and darkening valley, and Ætna, and a sense of chilliness. The sea was hardening to steel.

Suddenly, something broke in her. It was like the cracking of a shell, a rift in the surface of her conventional self. She burst into tears. She stood there by the wall, weeping. She was oblivious of the publicity of her emotion, though—as a matter of fact—there was no one there to see. She was loose and adrift on the rush of her emotion, and as it broadened she ceased to be merely self-conscious. Her emotion spread itself to engulf that other figure.

Oh, poor man! What a tragedy! Fifteen years! And he had told her. And if he cared—as she cared—?

In feeling, in the warm flux of her compassion, she began to comprehend. An act of courage? Oh, surely! And he had said nothing about loving her. He had justified nothing, asked her for nothing.

And she had given him nothing. She had just run away from him.

II

Meanwhile, the Pym world was preparing other alarums and excursions, for Sally had taken the stage, and Sally, as a partisan, could be an embarrassing ally. Had not Summer referred to "Mr. Damgood" as a hateful old man? And Sally needed no invitation to the dance. Always she was equal to a *pas seul*, and at the Hotel San Niccolo her reputation as a prodigiously maleficent child had not been sufficiently emphasized. Sally was ripe for riot; moreover, the explosion could be rationalized and dedicated to Elsie. Old Damgood was annoying Summer, and old Damgood should be splashed.

It so happened that on this particular afternoon Mr. Dashwood

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was giving a tea-party in the lounge of the San Niccolo. It was a social occasion, and Mr. Dashwood was full of airs and graces, the charming and debonair host. Sally observed him from the table where she and her mother were established, and Elsie was unexplainably absent, and Mrs. Pym, reflecting upon Elsie's absence, suspected Miss Summerhays of prudery.

"Sally, sit still."

"I am sitting still."

"Leave that thing alone."

Sally's inspiration had come to her, a glutinous, splendid, ruddy proposition. The Hotel San Niccolo provided for tea a very adhesive brand of conserve served in glass dishes. The dish itself was concave and rather suggestive of a glass skull-cap.

What a gesture! Supreme sensation!

Sally cuddled the glass dish, and getting up, made her way across the lounge to Mr. Dashwood's table. He was giving tea and flashing smiles to four ladies. His bald head shone like a casque.

The soul of Sally exulted. She slipped surreptitiously behind Mr. Dashwood's chair, and before the eyes of all she crowned him, applying that glass dish and jam suddenly downwards to his unsuspecting pate.

Tornado!

Miss Summerhays was caught by the tail of the storm. She was late, dreadfully late; she had been wandering about Taormina like a woman with a lantern that would keep going out and leaving her lost in dark alleys and culs-de-sac. She had got as far as the gateway of the Hotel Girgenti, and then both her compassion and her courage had failed her, and she had not succeeded in relighting her lamp.

Her impulse was to hurry through the vestibule of the San

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Niccolo and shut herself in her room, but the impulse was stayed. The concierge came forward quickly to intercept her.

"I have a message."

"For me?"

"Will you go to madam's room—at once."

"Is anything the matter?"

The concierge shrugged. He did not tell her that there had been a shocking fracas in the lounge, and that Mrs. Pym and her daughter had fought. Oh, yes, a disgraceful scene. The management had had to appear. One of the hotel's most valued clients with his head all jam, and Mrs. Pym and her blessed child suddenly savaging each other!

"Madam needs you—at once. Madam is leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

Elsie felt stricken. Well—really! Her feeling of bewilderment returned. She was conscious of hurrying confusedly upstairs and along corridors. What had happened? Surely enough had happened in one single day, and now she was to be involved in some other discord! Leaving to-morrow! Had the Hotel San Niccolo issued an ultimatum to Mrs. Pym?

She arrived at the lady's door. She could hear a sound as of a trunk being dragged across the floor. She knocked.

A livid voice bade her "Come in." She opened the door; she became aware of various confusions, trunks, clothes, tissue paper, shoes and stockings flung about, but chiefly she was conscious of Mrs. Pym, for Mrs. Pym's person was in as much disorder as the room. Her hair was anyhow, her dress torn at one shoulder, and one eye had a swollen look. And suddenly Elsie realized that she was being screamed at by Mrs. Pym.

"Where have you been? Where the hell have you been? Come

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in and shut the door. Don't stand there gaping."

Elsie closed the door. Her lips became tremulous in a very white face.

"I'd been out—"

But Mrs. Pym's face was like the grotesque mask of a condogushing wine.

"Damn it, don't I pay you to look after the child? Come on we've got to get packed. Don't stand there— I won't stay another day in this bloody hole. Yes, the kid's in there; I've locked her in

Elsie dared to ask a question. What had caused all this catastrophic eloquence and haste?

Mrs. Pym was kneeling by one of the trunks, and she suggested some flaming, vulgar little shrew with her hands in a washing tub.

"What happened! Good lord! If you'd been here—instead of messing about— The kid had one of her afternoons out, crammed a jam dish on an old fool's head. A scene—! Well—I lost my temper. Who wouldn't? I got her by the arm; I suppose I forgot it was the arm that had been broken, and suddenly she went off like a mad cat. Clawing and kicking. Yes, just look. Your own kid's fist. Oh, yes; a glorious to-do, I can tell you, and the little soapy swine of a manager butting in, and following me here. 'I'm sorry, madam, but your rooms are needed to-morrow. As if I was going to take that lying down. I told him we'd get out of his bloody caravanserai, and be glad. So—that's that!'"

She whisked a dress from the bed into the trunk.

"Yes, and what's more, it's all your fault. Don't stand there like a silly sheep. You'd better go and see to the damned kid and get her packed. No, we shan't go down to dinner. Not bloody likely. I shall want you to go down first thing in the morning to the travel agency in the Corso, and get tickets and seats on the Rome train

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Yes—Rome. Oh, don't stand and stare. Get busy."

Elsie looked bewildered. It was not in her to scream back, or to give Mrs. Pym scene for scene, and the sensitive skin of her was at the mercy of the virago's claws. Besides, this was piling Pelion upon Ossa, confusion upon confusion, and suddenly she was feeling very tired. She had no knees, no sense of resistance. She picked her way through the disorder of Mrs. Pym's possessions to the communicating door, and unlocking it, went through into Sally's room. She closed the door.

Sally was sitting on the pillow end of her bed. She, too, looked somewhat dishevelled, and a hand had left red finger marks on her cheek. Her air was stubborn and expectant.

"Sally, how could you?"

"Could I what?"

"Do such a thing."

The stubborn blue of Sally's eyes showed no contrition.

"I just put the jam dish on old Damgood's head. If you want to know the truth— Summer—nearly everybody laughed. Then mother got hold of me by the bad arm. It hurt."

"Yes, dear."

"It still hurts. She hurt me—and I wanted to hurt back. And I got the best of it, Summer, yes—I did. They had to carry me in here, two of them—"

"Oh, my dear!"

Sally sat on her pillows and stared, for Elsie had flopped down on Sally's bed and burst into tears. They were convulsive tears, and the bed shook, and the agitation of bed and body conveyed themselves to Sally. Her face crinkled itself up. She scrambled down from her perch, and fell upon Elsie.

"Summer—what's the matter? She's been at you, too. I heard her. She's a beast. Don't cry, old Summer—"

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Elsie clutched the child.

"Oh, my dear—I've had such a lot of trouble."

Sally's red face became a kind of squeegee of wet sympathy. She joined her woe to Elsie's.

"There's no one I care for but you, Summer. Yes, really. I want to come into your bed to-night, Summer. Let me come into your bed—"

"Oh, my dear—everything's gone wrong. Yes, you can come and sleep with me. But we've got to pack. We're going back to Rome to-morrow. Come and help me pack."

III

It was a night of confusion, for Elsie had to do the child's packing and her own packing, and a part of Mrs. Pym's, and there were further scenes, for Mrs. Pym, having exhausted one form of emotion, passed to another. She tried to make it up with Sally, but the child was not to be cajoled, and a further fracas threatened. Elsie, with her head becoming as untidy as the heads of the two protagonists, attempted a reconciliation.

"Say you're sorry, dear."

"Shan't. I'm not sorry. She ought to be sorry."

The confusion continued with mother and daughter inhabiting separate caves, while Elsie passed from one to the other. Chairs, the bed, the floor were still covered with Mrs. Pym's possessions, and she appeared to be incapable of dealing with them. She became a little hysterical, and tossed things about aimlessly, and abused them. There were too many shoes, too many stockings.

"Oh—I've got such a head. I can't do any more stooping."

It was eight o'clock and no dinner had arrived, and Mrs. Pym rang the bell violently and continuously, but there was no response.

"Damn them—the sulky beasts."

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Elsie had to go out into the corridor and waylay the valet and persuade him to go below and discover why the dinner tarried. Eventually it arrived in the hands of a cynical and perfunctory waiter who appeared to regard the room's disorder with sallow amusement. But even the dinner was a depressing business, for Sally insisted on munching her meal in solitude.

"I've got such a headache, Summer."

But if Elsie had to allow them their headaches, she could allow herself some heartache in the thick of all this dishevelment that was like the larger world in miniature. Untidy emotion, and half-filled trunks and clothes everywhere, and a dinner *à trois* dealt with in different corners and in crowded haste. What a business! It reminded her of one of those smudgy "transfers" beloved of children that refuse to adhere properly, and make a coloured blur on the white paper. It overlaid that other surface, the blank sheet of her maid's tragedy. What was she to do? Disorder, haste, bewilderment! They were going back to Rome. She might not see him again. Ought she to see him again?

She could not think or decide. Almost it seemed that circumstances were crowding upon her and hurrying her away, and perhaps it would be as well. Perhaps she might leave him a letter. She ate a confection that the San Niccolo christened fruit-salad, and she was aware of Mrs. Pym going for a second time to her wardrobe and helping herself to a "tonic." But the pity of it. The world might have been so different a world, all sea and sky and sunlight, and a sense of escape. She was very tired. She felt that she could not stand up and confront this chaos. She wanted to lie down and forget.

But there was that other chaos to be dealt with, and she folded dresses, and stuffed stockings into shoes, and managed to find labels and address them. Mrs. Pym was complaining that she had

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lost her keys, and her complaining became a little maudlin. It took them twenty minutes to find those keys. At last, the worst of the disorder had been sorted out and put away, but her own belongings waited for her.

"I'll go and do my things. Sally wants to come with me."

Mrs. Pym was the complete cynic.

"Oh, yes, I'm nothing but her mother. I'm going to take a couple of aspirins and turn in."

Elsie took Sally upstairs to her room, and put the child into her own bed, and when she had packed her trunk she undressed and joined Sally. She turned out the light, and was aware of the little, warm, solid body cuddling up to her.

"I'm so tired, Summer."

She gathered the child to her. She seemed to find consolation, a soothing, elemental solace in this close human contact. She too was tired at the end of so disastrous a day.

IV

Vane ventured as far as the courtyard of the Hotel San Niccolo. He stood just inside the iron gates, and saw the sky as a blue-black canopy thickly pricked with stars. Two tall cypresses grew beside the gate like the arms of Atlas upholding the sky.

He heard an orchestra playing. Here and there a shuttered window was barred with a blur of light. He could see the arched entrance, and the glazed door, and a porter in a blue coat busy with letters.

His impulse carried him thus far and no farther, for, if the heart of woman shrank from the live reality, then—all this was but an episode. Ships passing in the night, each self as detached as the stars. He felt no bitterness towards her, though he was conscious of great loneliness. She was so sensitive a creature, with

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her serious eyes fixed on the conventions. What right had he to complain? The hot metal of reality had slipped through her shocked fingers, that was all.

He turned back and made his way into the Corso. It was empty and dark and shuttered up, and as he passed along it he felt that life would be for him like this street. He was a stroller, a mere passer-by, with no door or window that was his. No hand would push back a shutter, and no dim face look out and utter soft, secret words.

“Enter, for love is here.”

And without it life was but an empty street.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ELSIE woke with a headache. It was to be a trying and a tiring day, but she won sympathy from the most unexpected of quarters, even from Sally. Sally met the morning with no disabilities, and was up and opening the shutters.

"Aren't you getting up, Summer?"

"My dear, I've got such a headache."

"Where's your aspirin?"

"My bottle is empty."

"Mother's got plenty."

Sally seized the responsibility. She unlocked the door and scurried off in her pyjamas, and meeting their floor-waiter on the stairs she sniffed hot coffee. Yes, hot coffee would be good for Summer, and since the waiter was a pleasant fellow and the staff of the San Niccolo had some sympathy with the governess, the waiter promised hot coffee immediately for No. 73.

"Pronto!" said Sally.

"Pronto, signorina!" And he laughed.

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Mrs. Pym had to get up and unlock her door when Sally knocked; she had expected Miss Summerhays and not Sally, but the child was not interested in elaborate explanations. She wanted the aspirin bottle, and finding it on her mother's dressing-table, grabbed it and made tracks. She produced to Elsie two tablets in the hollow of a small, hot hand, and tooth-glass full of water.

"Coffee's coming, Summer. I ordered it."

"It's sweet of you, dear."

Strange that she should be succoured and solaced by her little savage, but it was so, and then the waiter and the *petit déjeuner* arrived, and Sally poured out the coffee. She was solemn and solicitous, and allowed Summer to know that if she chose she could dispose of all the sugar.

"Would you like the shutters closed, Summer?"

"Just for a while, dear. Yes, the headache's better already."

She had her heartache still, and she knew that it would endure through all that day. Something had to be decided, oh, yes—something had to be decided, and she had so little time, and the train left at noon. The coffee and the drug soothed her headache, and sending an unusually docile Sally down to dress, she lay still for half an hour. What was she to do—try to see him, or leave a message, and what sort of message? Had she anything to say to him that could carry any final significance. "I'm so sorry, so very sorry. We are going away. Perhaps it is as well." But how hopeless and trivial and inadequate the words sounded in the face of his courage, for she was beginning to comprehend his courage.

She got up and dressed and packed the last of her belongings, and hurried down to Mrs. Pym's room. She found Mrs. Pym half dressed and in a state of nerves. The management had sent up the bill, and it contained items that Mrs. Pym questioned, and its total was embarrassingly and unexpectedly heavy. Mrs. Pym's

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margin was none too secure. She drank coffee and made complaints.

"Absolute swindlers. I'll go down and have a row. You'd better rush out and see about tickets and a sleeper. Yes, I'm a bit short. I can let you have a thousand lire. Yes, you had better fix it up at once."

Elsie hurried out, and the day was fresh and clean and beautiful, and its beauty seemed to touch the wound of yesterday. Oh, if she could see him, even for a minute, she might find something to say, something that was impulsive and generous. Why shouldn't she see him? She could call at the agency and obtain the tickets, and then hurry on to the Hotel Girgenti. She had time. But already the day was taking on a sense of haste and of fluster, and her interview with the Sicilian in the agency was to fluster her still further.

The noon train from Taormina had no sleeping accommodation. The lady would have to take the 18.57. And the price of the tickets and the sleepers? He named a sum that made Elsie's thousand lire appear wholly inadequate.

She was agitated. She would have to go back to the hotel and consult with Mrs. Pym. She hurried. She found Mrs. Pym fresh from a difference of opinion with the management, and the management had not been vanquished. Moreover, the lady's rooms would have to be vacant before noon.

"I'm sorry. There are no sleepers on the twelve train, and the price—"

"Good lord! How much?"

Elsie named the figure, and Mrs. Pym's mouth looked wry.

"What! Positively absurd! First-class tickets? I haven't the money on me. These people have bled me white."

Elsie's eyes grew anxious. Time was passing, and she was so

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conscious of that other reality lying beneath all these petty worries. It was like trying to reach down for something precious through a tangle of thorns.

"Well, we shall have to go second."

"Second! And all night in the train! What time does the damned thing get to Rome?"

"About eight in the morning."

"Oh, marvellous!"

"Then there will be the registered luggage."

"And no restaurant-car, I suppose. Ham sandwiches and chianti. Oh, very well. Go and fix it up. And say, I've got a head still. I want you to finish my packing and strap the trunks."

"Yes. I'll be back as quickly as I can."

But she was feeling flustered. She was losing her head just when her crisis was at its climax. Oh, those futile obstructions, these silly bewilderments! To be short of money at the moment when she was concerned with things that money could not buy. She must see him, speak a few words. She raced out and along the Corso to the agency. She bought those second-class tickets to Rome, and with the wretched things in her handbag, hurried on to the Hotel Girgenti.

And suddenly she became a creature of panic. She got as far as the gate, hesitated, turned back. What could she say to him? She stood looking in a shop window, and then her fear veered round like a fickle breeze. Yes, she must see him. She walked back to the Hotel Girgenti, and with a frozen face went in and confronted her reality.

A porter met her. She stammered:

"I wish to see Mr. Vane."

The porter looked at her doubtfully. He believed that he had seen the gentleman going out, but he would make inquiries. He

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disappeared, and Elsie stood like Lot's wife.

In two minutes the man was back.

"The gentleman has gone out. He took his lunch with him."

She did not remember saying anything to the porter, and she was not conscious of leaving the hotel. She was just aware of herself hurrying along the Corso, and of a little knot of pain somewhere, and of a feeling of dull and bewildered finality. He had gone out with his lunch! She would not see him again. Perhaps it was better so.

But in the lounge of the Hotel San Niccolo she managed to sit down and scribble a note.

"Good-bye. We are leaving suddenly for Rome. Perhaps—I did understand—more than I thought. I'm so sorry, so very sorry, and ashamed. Good-bye."

She put her little note in an envelope, addressed it, and carried it to the concierge.

"If a gentleman named Vane should call, will you please give him this?"

II

Vane had taken the mule-path that goes down to the sea, and up which the fishermen race with their baskets of fish. He carried his lunch in a sort of paper satchel with handles of string, and the sky and the sea were very blue. The island of the Blue Grotto had a fringe of foam, and very soon the fruit trees would be in blossom. Spring was coming, the shepherd would pipe and lambs play, and all the dear sentimentalists would sigh over the almond blossom and murmur "How lovely!"

Yet, what was beauty but a mood, a phantasm of the senses?

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The reality of it was utterly impersonal, not even pagan, though the ancients had dreamed of Pan and the nymphs and a galaxy of grotesque creatures. Both Adonis and Christ were dead, and Aphrodite no more than foam of the sea, yet when he met a breathless, barefooted youth trotting up the path with a basket of prawns on his head, Vane envied the native. He stood aside to let the fellow pass, and was given a smile and a flash of white teeth. No Excelsior this, but a lusty lad racing to be the first on the Corso and so capture the prawn market.

The path brought Vane to the very dusty road at the foot of the cliffs, and following it a little way he discovered a bay with a lunette of sand. He made his way down to the water's edge and sat on the sand, and some twenty yards away two young things were sun-bathing. The girl lay flat on her back with her hands under her head, and kept raising and lowering a pair of thin brown legs. The man smoked a cigarette and stared at the sky.

Vane examined his lunch. It consisted of a wing of a chicken, a roll, two hard-boiled eggs, two oranges, and a wedge of cheese in rice paper. He could not say that he was hungry, nor did that chicken's wing tempt him to play the primitive. He was conscious of other emptinesses, and of those two young things on the hot sand, and the naturalness of their nakedness. They seemed to belong to the sea and the sky and to a naked and pagan Spring, while he was like old Time preparing to suck an orange.

Yet he thought: "Twenty years ago I was young, and not realizing it. How little youth understands! Life seems an infinitude of sun and sea and hot sand, and then—suddenly—"

He cracked one of the eggs on a stone and, carefully collecting the pieces of shell, placed them tidily in a wisp of paper. He reflected: "She might have been here with me. Well—perhaps—when she has got over the shock—? I suppose—if a woman can

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care—she might transcend the conventions.” He peeled an orange and was equally careful with the pieces of peel, and behind him a train rattled past, and he did not notice it or suspect that it carried Elsie and the Pym world back to Rome.

Yet, while the afternoon was still young, Vane climbed back to Taormina, and leaving his luncheon bag and its debris with the porter of the Girgenti, he strolled across to the gate of the town. The gentleman in uniform gave him a jocund and sympathetic smile.

“For two, signore?”

Was it an omen? He paid for two tickets, and left an additional lire with the augur, and passed on to the sacred hill where the sacrificial fire was still burning, and where she yet might come to lay her hands at it, and to look at him with eyes of understanding and compassion. He had asked for nothing, nor would he ask for anything. The choice was hers. She had the key to life’s coffee; she would either not use it, or fumble with it, or discover the horror that you feared was not there. She had to find out life for herself. Like those two young things upon the sands, she would have to sit side by side, naked and unashamed, struggling against conventional make-believes.

He waited there until the bells chimed out, and she had come, and the sun was setting, and he thought: “She is still afraid of me. How strange that she should be afraid of me, and yet so natural! For I am the one person in the world whom she does not fear. I have ceased to be passionate and greedy. I ask for no more than to take. But perhaps she will never recover from her fear? Black is for ever black, and white white, and an outcast is always an outcast. How strange! Does the world still think of silliness? But, then, the world has not hung on a cross for forty years. She did not see me as a man who has come down from

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cross—but if she should do? The penitent thief, and Christ's blessing!"

He left the edge of the hill and made his way down past a ruin full of shadows to the gate, and its guardian suffered him to pass in silence, a silence that was discreet and sympathetic.

"To-morrow, signore, there is always to-morrow."

Vane allowed yet another day of hope and of increasing loneliness to elapse before he began to question the finality of her silence. She did not come to the ruins of the theatre; she remained invisible; nor was the Pym world to be met upon the Corso. If you sat at one of the tables outside the Sicilian café all Taormina paraded in your presence, and Vane sat there before lunch and after tea when Elsie and Miss Pym might be expected to take exercise. He was disappointed. And at the Girgenti he presented himself regularly at the concierge's counter.

"Any letters for me?"

There were no letters for him.

At the end of the second day he began to explore other possibilities. Why assume the permanence of her panic, or conclude that she was so wholly a creature of the conventions? She might be ill. The two Americans at the Hotel Girgenti were in bed with influenza, and the English doctor was in charge. Vane's most cheerful little waiter had told him so.

Why not clinch the matter, go boldly to the San Niccolo and make inquiries? Surely it was possible to overdo an attitude of sensitive expectancy? Might not she be sitting waiting with other eyes upon the conventions, leaving it to the man to move?

He walked up to the San Niccolo about six o'clock, and entering, spoke to the concierge.

"Excuse me, are Mrs. Pym and Miss Summerhays staying here?"

"No, sir, they left yesterday morning."

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"Left Taormina?"

"Yes, sir. Are you Mr. Vane?"

"I am."

The concierge pivoted, picked a letter out of a pigeon-hole, and handed it to Vane.

"The younger lady left this, sir, for you."

Vane stood in the vestibule and read Elsie's little note.

"I am so very sorry. Good-bye."

That was its message. They had gone back to Rome, and the Eternal City seemed to him to be as vague and as vast as the universe. Had she meant it to be so? Had she dropped a dark veil and called it Rome?

CHAPTER TWENTY



s. BLOOM of Pulteney Street was the most sentimental of persons, probably because Pulteney Street and the Fulham Road were not highways of Romance, though a mood of maudlin gaiety might try conclusions with a greasy pavement and find its adventure in eluding the jaws of a red bus. Mrs. Bloom might assert that life wasn't all violets. It wasn't. It was so full of the smell of cooking and of soap-suds and of stale gas-stove that Mrs. Bloom would sometimes wonder why she did not smother life by putting her head in the gas-oven. But that was the mood of the morning-after. Her philosophy was not that of the prohibitionist.

She had yearnings that transcended the odour of boiled greens. She liked her foxtrots to be luscious and full of love, and her voices fat and emotional. She liked them to sing of amorous things, of kisses like ripe peaches, of glutinous embraces. "When I dreamed amid the Roses—with You." But her poor dreams were so short in the hair, and so much like a cracked gramophone record, that she had to translate them into the language of physical disharmonies. Since she could not talk about love, she liked to talk about indigestion, her own and other people's, and cures for soft corns,

and veins that were varicose, and visits to the hospital. An operation on some acquaintance or neighbour was as good as a fire in the next street, or one of those nice juicy murder cases in the daily paper.

"Yes, believe me—the doctors took her stomach right out and found a growth the size of an orange. Cut it out and sewed her up, and she's had three kids since. Marvellous—I call it."

Incidentally, Mrs. Bloom's passion for things pathological was finding a subject in Mary Summerhays. Mrs. Bloom was worried about Mrs. Summerhays, and justifiably so.

"Now, do try and eat a bit more, dearie."

Though whether we humans eat to live or live to eat is yet another problem for advanced psychology, and if Mrs. Mary ate less and less, she also knew that she would not live long. Did it matter? Life was like a cobweb to her fingers. The one thing she feared was that there might be too much pain.

Mrs. Bloom, kind creature, had things to say to her next-door neighbour.

"She's getting to look so yellow. I don't like the look of her, Mrs. Bunce—I don't—reely. I can't tempt 'er with anythink. And she's such a reel lady, poor soul, always wanting to save a person trouble."

But Mrs. Mary, knowing what she knew, went secretly to see a doctor. She chose a stranger and used her maiden name, partly because she thought that it would be more easy to escape from a stranger. She was one of those shy women who will turn down a side street in order to avoid a troublesome acquaintance. Also, she was shy of doctors, and the authority they assumed. As Mrs. Bloom put it: "Before you can say knife, they've got you on the table."

Mrs. Mary's doctor happened to be one of those overworked little men who yet find time to be kind. Mrs. Summerhays' signs

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and symptoms were so sinister and significant that he tried to persuade her to go into hospital for observation, but at the same time he did not want to frighten her.

"I should like you to be X-rayed and to try the effect of diet."

Mrs. Summerhays understood that he was handling her delicately.

"I'm not afraid. I want to know. You think it is serious?"

He looked at her with grave kindness.

"Well—yes. I rather suspect—"

He was surprised when she smiled at him.

"Thank you. I think it is best one should know. One worries less when a thing is final."

He wrote her out a prescription and gave her some advice on diet, and told her to visit him again in three days' time, but he never saw her again. Having paid him his fee, and obtained his confirmation of her own suspicions, she disappeared. She had a horror of hospitals, and no spare money for doctors' bills, and no particular fear of death. Life had gone very grey, and she was tired.

Nor did she write and tell her daughter. She was no sensationalist, like her late husband, who—if he had had qualms—had rushed home and assured the women that he was developing pneumonia, or appendicitis. She was a quietist, and perhaps a fatalist, and she had no wish to placate her self-regard by trying to harrow Elsie.

Mrs. Bloom had suggested a letter to the daughter.

"You ought to tell her, you ought—reely."

"But I'm not ill."

She gave Mrs. Bloom one of her grey and uncomplaining smiles. She had courage—or was it that she did not care?

"Besides, my daughter will be home in the spring."

"Is there anything you fancy—particular?"

"You cook fish so nicely."

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"Fried or boiled, dearie?"

"Boiled, I think."

She found tranquillity in her self-restraint, and in her silence. She had suffered many years of tired self-restraint, and it came to her naturally so that she remained quietly with herself in her own secret corner. Yes, why worry Elsie? For Elsie would take the affair with such tragic seriousness, and Mrs. Summerhays shrank from emotion. It was like the traffic; it disturbed you when you were on the point of dropping off to sleep. Moreover, in ceasing to live she would cease to be a problem to Elsie, and Elsie would inherit a minute income and the furniture that was stored.

Mrs. Summerhays did not alter her mode of living. She could walk as far as the Cheyne Row Gardens, and sit on a seat near the bust of the Sage of Chelsea, and feel the river flowing, and watch the traffic and the children and the sparrows. She sat there in all sorts of weather. She allowed herself two books a week, changing them herself at the library. The choice was limited, but that, too, was of no great consequence. Books had very little to say to Mrs. Summerhays, for she was so near the last page of her own history.

II

Of all the journeys which Elsie took, that night passage in the train to Rome was the most wearisome and self-revealing. At Messina they captured lunch and provisions for the rest of the journey, a flask of Chianti, hard rolls cut in half and containing ham, some fruit and packets of biscuits; and at Messina their second-class carriage filled itself to repletion.

Elsie got out of the compartment with Sally, and standing on the open ferry as the carriages were taken across the Straits she felt the wind in her face and the suddenness of her self-accusations.

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The Sicilian coast did not smile at her, though it was beautiful and sun-steeped and strange. Yes, she had failed him rather badly. She had run away from her reality.

Sally was in high spirits, and enchanted with the ferry. She did not think great things of Sicily, though she had capped the adventure with a dish of jam.

"Silly old Taormina. Aren't you glad to go, Summer?"

"Yes, dear, in a way."

"I wonder if old Damgood's had a shampoo."

"I expect so."

"I believe you've still got a headache, Summer?"

"No, dear, not now."

"I cured it, didn't I?"

"Yes, you cured it. Don't climb on the railings, dear."

And Sally did not climb on the railings.

Glimpses of Calabrian peasant life were more interesting to Sally than to Elsie, for Sally had the window and more air.

"Oh, look, Summer, there's a man riding on a pig."

"It couldn't be a pig, dear."

"But I saw it!"

Elsie was being somewhat submerged by the superabundance of a Sicilian Ceres with a vast bosom and a moustache, and as the journey continued, the woman seemed to grow larger and still more large. Such travelling was too intimate, especially when Ceres made a meal off cold pork and garlic and licked her fingers, and Sally had to be restrained from imitation that was not flattering. In the opposite corner Mrs. Pym scorned the second-class world, and appeared self-weary, and her face quite aged. She kept asking Elsie where they were, and all that Elsie could say was that they were somewhere in Southern Italy. She was beginning to hope that Ceres was not travelling all the way to Rome.

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Presently she escaped into the corridor, and stood watching the landscape sliding by and the night coming on. She was very tired, and longing to be alone. Oh, the luxury of solitude, a luxury not allowed to second-class lives! She wanted to think, and she could not think; a sort of warm poultice seemed to have been applied to her forehead.

"Summer! Summer!"

She was called into the compartment. Mrs. Pym was needing her scent, and Elsie had to rescue a dressing-case from beneath other lumber in the rack. Some other perfume was to be called upon to contend with the odour of garlic breathed forth by Ceres. Incidentally, when Elsie resumed her seat the woman in black had spread herself still more abundantly like a sack gradually settling itself to the business of sitting.

They improvised dinner, and drank Chianti out of paper tumblers, and Sally, who had to be allowed Chianti because they had forgotten to buy mineral water, spilt half her wine down her frock. It amused her; it amused the whole carriage.

"I'm all bloody, Summer."

"My dear!"

"Suppose I had murdered somebody?"

The inward Elsie shuddered. Was she to be haunted by that impossible and incredible word? And then night came, and the compartment addressed itself to sleep. Ceres took off her boots. She grew more and more like the Goddess of Abundance, an overflowing and smothering warm mass. She snored. The child had fallen asleep with her head against Elsie's shoulder, and Elsie sat pinned between the two of them, youth and that submerging matron. She listened to the rhythm of the wheels, and to Mrs. Pym restless and rustling in her corner.

"How sordid, how sordid, how sordid! I've let him down, I've

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let him down. It's all over, all over."

The wheels seemed to be in her head. She closed her eyes, and felt her neighbour like *Ætna*, a mountain that would slowly and surely engulf her in lava. The mountain rumbled. But presently from sheer weariness she fell asleep, but kept waking and dozing off again. The seat grew unimaginably hard, and yet her weariness was more urgent than the hardness of the seat. In one of her waking moments she realized that the fingers of her left hand were in *durance*. The child was holding her hand.

Rome at eight o'clock in the morning, and a Rome that was being rained on. No one had breakfasted, and the compartment was like a hutch in which a number of large animals had been penned up for the night. *Ceres* had put on her boots, and was producing a paper bag.

Elsie had a cracking headache. She was on the edge of nausea. She thought, "If that woman repeats the pork and garlic—I shall be sick." She had put on her hat, and it was crooked, and Mrs. Pym was busy with a mirror and her complexion outfit. She was much tougher than Elsie.

"You've got your hat on crooked."

"Put it straight for me, Sally."

Sally did so, and with gentleness, for poor Summer's face was like the Dover cliffs on a dismal day in December. Oh, for some hot coffee! On such a morning love was an absurd illusion, and your soul cried out for physical things, hot coffee and closed shutters and a bed.

At last they were out of that accursed train, and two porters had loaded up their hand-luggage, and Elsie had handed over the registered luggage receipt to one of them. She felt that she could walk just as far as the hotel bus without disgracing herself, and then an arrogant little "Blackshirt" waylaid them and stopped

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the porters. All this hand-luggage had travelled in the compartment, had it! Very well, they should pay duty on it.

He waved them back towards an office, and Elsie protested.

"But we have paid for our luggage. This is—"

He snubbed her.

"Americans and English pay."

Elsie felt that she was going to be sick. She appealed to Mrs. Pym, who was asking what the little brigand wanted.

"He says we have to pay on this luggage. Will—you go? I'm afraid—I'm not up to it—I feel so sick."

Mrs. Pym accepted the situation, but without any grace, and she said things to the Fascist official which he, fortunately, did not understand. He made Mrs. Pym pay fifty-three lire, twenty centesimi, for the hand-luggage, a paltry sum, but sufficiently irritating at the end of such a journey, and especially so when the lady's ready cash had been reduced to a hundred-lire note.

Sally had remained with Elsie, and somehow Elsie managed to surmount her qualms, and to climb into the hotel bus. They were driven to the Elyseo, for in the present state of Mrs. Pym's finances the Hotel Elyseo might be hailed as a friendly refuge. Moreover, Mrs. Pym expected to find Sybil Gasson there.

She looked sourly at her governess.

"You'd better go and lie down. You look absolutely awful."

"Oh—I shall be better when I have had a little breakfast."

But what a different Rome was this, with the sky all grey, and the trees of the Borghese Gardens dim and dripping!

III

The situation was dominated by financial considerations. Miss Sybil Gasson had left Rome, and when Mrs. Pym called on Messrs.

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Thomas Cook & Son and presented a cheque she was told that some ten days would have to elapse before an English cheque could be turned into cash. Mrs. Pym knew this very well, but having put on a two hundred guinea fur coat and a manner of the same quality, she was in the habit of trying to bluff a subordinate world.

"Most annoying. I don't want to stay here ten days."

She was told that she could wire to her bankers, and that they could telegraph her credit. She dispatched a wire, and returned to the Hotel Elyseo to await the reply, but she was one of those sophisticated persons who assume a beautiful innocence in the presence of finance. Having no morals in the matter of money she yet could not distinguish the honest from the dishonest. Her attitude to her bank balance was exquisitely vague, and bankers are apt to find such vagueness irritating.

Moreover, she had been gambling on the Stock Exchange. Cynic though she was, she continued to believe in some of those bright and persuasive gentlemen who preside over financial bargain sales. Mrs. Pym's particular gentleman, having arranged to tout certain oil shares and to assist in unloading them on the public, had persuaded Mrs. Pym that she could play cow to any bull. Capital appreciation is a picturesque phrase, and Mrs. Pym's sage had offered her a safe "lock up," certain oil shares at 3s. 6d. a share, which he assured her would be worth six shillings in six months. Mrs. Pym had locked up a thousand pounds or so, and had helped her representative to oblige a more influential client, and the shares, instead of appreciating, had slumped steadily. They were now quoted, unofficially, at 2s. 3d.

This was an incident, but it had cramped the style of Mrs. Pym's current account. Also, she was a prolific drawer of cheques, and when her English bankers wired her that they were dealing with

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the matter by letter she was enraged. She had decided to move on to Beaulieu-sur-Mer, for there was a casino at Beaulieu, and Monte Carlo was conveniently close. Meanwhile, those wretched pedants in her London bank had immobilised her. Having no ready cash and no credit she could not leave Rome.

The bankers' letter arrived. It informed her that her account was overdrawn to the extent of £373 4s. 11d. Meticulous prigs! Why bother about the eleven pennies? But the bank would offer her credit to the extent of another hundred pounds, and would enlarge that credit if Mrs. Pym or her legal representative chose to deposit accredited securities. Perhaps she would advise them further in the matter, and they remained her obedient servants.

"What damned cheek."

She dispatched her telegram. "Wire—hundred pounds—per T. Cook—immediately. Notifying my lawyers."

But if Mrs. Pym was temporarily embarrassed, Miss Summerhays was even more embarrassed, and permanently so. Truthfully she could say that she hadn't a lira, and she was needing soap and tooth powder and a new pair of stockings. She was feeling very ragged in both her dress and her emotions, and in a mood to ask life humbly to forgive her her importunities and her sins.

"Do you think you could let me have a little money?"

Mrs. Pym did not prevaricate. Could anything be more tactless and inconsiderate than this request?

"I haven't any money. You'll have to wait."

"Even ten lire."

"I haven't much more than that myself. I'm waiting for my bankers to wire me credit. We can't go on to Beaulieu till I get it."

"But I haven't any soap. I can't even buy a stamp."

"Stamps! Get them from the concierge. They'll be put down to us."

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It was a preposterous situation, but Mrs. Pym did present Elsie with ten lire, and possibly that small concession was a straw blown by the wind. Miss Summerhays was an incumbrance and an expense, and Mrs. Pym began to regard her as a superfluity that had to be endured because of Sally. She could not be left alone with Sally, but Elsie had so improved the child that it might be possible to send Sally to school when they returned to England. Moreover, Miss Summerhays was not a sympathetic companion. She appeared depressed and moody, and disapproving. Undoubtedly this serious young person was a prude and a prig. She had none of the new tolerance, and Mrs. Pym divined in Elsie a dumb and shocked hostility.

But, as a matter of fact, Elsie was not very conscious of Mrs. Pym and her disharmonies. Chance and the management of the Hotel Elyseo had put her back in that same little pink bedroom on the fourth floor, and she could sit on the same balcony and look at the same trees. She was aware of sunlight and blue distances, and shadows upon the grass, and of that other balcony next to hers. She was alone with her reality. She was seeing Vane as she had seen him in Rome, a solitary and sensitive creature somehow afraid of her and her nearness. He had been so hesitant, so self-repressed, and now she understood the inwardness of his scruples.

She thought, "He wouldn't tell me—when we were here."

She asked herself the inevitable question.

"Why did he tell me at Taormina?"

The inference was so obvious.

"He told me because things had changed between us, because he believed I could— Oh, what a mean beast I have been to him, what a little selfish, refined prig! He did not ask me for anything. I could have given him— And I just ran away."

She wrote three letters to Vane before one of them satisfied her,

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and though its satisfactions were relative, it had the virtue of being simple and short.

"I am so utterly ashamed of myself. We had to leave Taormina quite suddenly, and I could not see you again. We are at the Hotel Elyseo, and my room and my balcony are just the same, but I am different.

"We go on to Beaulieu in a few days. It is between Monte Carlo and Nice. I think the name of the hotel is the Splendide.

"I am so utterly ashamed.

"ELSIE SUMMERHAYS."

CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE



MISS SUMMERHAYS' letter to Mr. Henry Vane was delivered at the Hotel Girgenti the day after Mr. Vane had left Taormina, for he too had fled from Sicily. He was returning to Rome, and had broken the journey at Naples, for if he had missed Syracuse and Palermo he could propitiate his Baedeker by a pilgrimage to Pompeii. At the moment he did not very much care where he went or what he saw, for Miss Summerhays had reattached the red L of the life-sentence to his sleeve. But Pompeii fascinated him in spite of his melancholy. It was both alive and dead, and the faint perfume of its paganism was like the scent of musk, sacred to Eros. Very possibly the Pompeians had not made of the god a nice, well-soaped little seraph in a surplice. They had not blushed for their wine-shops and their brothels, or troubled their souls about the red blood in the arena. And if a dog licked the feet of a girl she may have caressed the beast, and not have turned dark eyes towards a refined and suburban heaven and wondered if the virtue had gone out of her.

Virtue! What was virtue? And sitting on a strip of wall in the

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sun Vane had remembered certain things that Stuart Blagden had said to him. They had dined together at Blagden's club on the night before Vane had left England. Blagden had said to him, "You'll find the new world using a different language. We don't talk about God, or honour, or patriotism or sin. That coinage has ceased to be current. We're much more casual. We can't be bothered with big words and superfine gestures. The tax-monger hits us too hard, and the Press has used up all our adjectives. Our ideals are pretty ragged and on the roads. A man may allow that a thing's decent, or that something isn't done, or that the sex game is bad business. That's about as far as you'll get him to go. If you begin talking to him about honour or chastity or his immortal soul he'll think you are a crank or a share-tout or a sex pervert, and get up quickly and leave you. And perhaps it is better as it is."

Vane smiled a little melancholy smile. Yet, obviously there were people who had not reverted to the Pompeian age, nice, serious women who still dreamed of uplift. Women who could be shocked. Yes, Pompeii's phallic advertisements were somewhat crude. And next day he resumed his journey and arrived at Rome and put up at the selfsame Hotel Elyseo. He had missed the Pym world and Miss Summerhays by one day. They were on the way to Beaulieu.

Incidentally he made inquiries at the hotel bureau. The concierge appeared pleased to see him.

"By the way, has that English lady been here again? The lady with the child?"

"Mrs. Pym?"

"Yes."

"They left yesterday."

Vane's eyes narrowed. He walked away, and then came back and asked yet another casual question.

"Any letters for me?"

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No, there were no letters for him. He was one of those men to whom no one wrote letters.

Rome had recovered her good humour, for the fine weather had returned, and early in the morning Vane saw and heard that floral fellow in his bright blue trousers busy under the Aurelian wall. He appeared carrying a six-foot box tree in a green tub, and the tree seemed to grow out of his stomach. For five desultory days Vane wandered about Rome, avoiding picture galleries, museums and churches, for he preferred the streets to the culture of objects shut up in glass cases. He was aware of Rome as a live city, as a city that worked. These masons and labourers and tram-drivers and chauffeurs, the police and the shopmen and the waiters in the cafés all had their jobs. They were fortunate. They did not have to loaf around the world on an effortless, objectless excursion. There was one labour of Hercules which has not been recorded, the quest of the golden apples when apples of gold had become rotten.

Vane, happening to hang over a Roman wall, saw below him a mason at work repairing the balustrading of a terrace. The man was middle-aged, with an intelligent and pleasant face, and a little black beard cut to a point. Vane watched the deft movements of the trowel. The man was interested in his work, and not conscious of being watched. Occasionally he whistled a few notes.

Yes, that fellow was fortunate, and Vane walked back to the Hotel Elyseo reflecting upon one of life's platitudes, and at the Elyseo he found Elsie's letter waiting for him. It had travelled from Taormina to Naples, and from Naples to Rome, and no one had hastened its travels.

His fingers were just a little flurried as he opened it. He had carried it to his room, and out on to the balcony. He read.

"I am so ashamed."

He looked at the sunlit trees in the Borghese. Something had

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happened to them and to him. She had given him the name of the place on the French coast. Beaulieu. That meant that he might follow her.

II

Mrs. Bloom looked out of a window, and seeing Pulteney Street in all its nakedness on a grim January day, she was moved to wonder at life. How had it all happened, how had London happened? Why hadn't somebody prohibited London? For Mrs. Bloom had moments of inward warmth and enlightenment when a world that was rational appeared as a sort of municipal dust-bin, and only the irrational was worth while. She divined beauty in fantastic unreasonableness. She remembered that there were two public-houses in Pulteney Street.

"If they shut up the pubs—there'd be a revolution."

For Mrs. Bloom understood that mystery which is hidden from the official mind, a people's passion for the irrational and for all things that happen unexpectedly. The world does not ask for a reason; it asks to be young and inquisitive and greedy and grand and generous, and Mrs. Bloom was very much of the world, an elderly girl with *acne rosacea* and grey hair. If she had a God she thanked him for the pubs and the "pictures."

Mrs. Bloom's window happened to be Mrs. Summerhays' window, and in turning away from it and the stucco of Pulteney Street, she noticed an object lying on a chair. It was a black coat with a poor rabbit-skin collar, and Mrs. Bloom exclaimed:

"She 'asn't gone out without that, surely!"

But Mrs. Summerhays had gone out, and had left her coat on the chair, and the sky was the colour of stucco, and a north-east wind scolded at every corner.

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"Well, I never! She must be dotty."

That there should be a tragic reasonableness in such irrationality was not revealed to Mrs. Bloom, who still desired some of those crude sensations which make up the life of the crowd. You might rightly be absent-minded about the number of little drinks you had had, but going out without your coat into that ghastly grey atmosphere was quite another matter. If Mrs. Summerhays had pawned that coat, well, of course, the inspiration might have been obvious.

"She must be dotty! What's she thinking about?"

With Mary Summerhays it was less a question of thinking than of feeling, for now that man has rid himself of much transcendental humbug, pain is not suffered for the sake of placating a divine providence. Mrs. Summerhays had begun to experience pain. It came upon her suddenly and in strange spasms, causing her to sit rigid and motionless and to hold her breath. It was as inexorable and grey-eyed as an English winter, and when she had looked into the thing's eyes she had understood its ruthlessness.

She had felt afraid. To what ends would she endure were she to endure? Why should death come to her in such a guise, gradually, mercilessly, when death might be mere bemusement before the eternal sleep? She thought of Elsie out there in the sunlight, and remained silent, sitting on her seat. When she died Elsie would be a little better off, the mistress of a minute income and some furniture; and money was so utterly important. Dross and dirt indeed! Money was a beautiful and precious thing, perhaps the most beautiful and precious thing in all the world.

And the immediate future? A hospital? Yes, no doubt they were kind to you in hospitals, kinder perhaps than in some nursing-homes, but Mrs. Summerhays had a horror of hospitals. To her such a place would be an official and orderly death-house. She

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would become a number. Her pain would be just Number Seventeen's or Number Twenty-Three's pain. She would be one of the crowd, and she hated crowds. The final mercy would be a screen put round her bed.

It seemed to her that it would be so much more rational to die quickly and cheaply and alone, for such an escape would save much trouble, and much pain. It would be more merciful to Elsie, the one creature in the world who might be expected to care. Those long and devastating illnesses were apt to bear too heavily upon the heart of love. There were secret prayers that the sufferer might pass. Poor Elsie! She had had so little from life, and she was so soft-hearted. Why involve Elsie in vicarious torment? And Elsie still believed in God.

So, Mary Summerhays had left the coat with the rabbit-skin collar lying on a chair, and had walked out into Pulteney Street and down other streets to the river. She had chosen a seat in that strip of garden on the embankment. The river was a grey and troubled flood. The beautiful old houses behind her had gentle eyes.

The wind roared. She was aware of the rather dismal and sooty shrubs behaving restlessly. They seemed to clutch at each other. They had a blackness, and so had the wind. Yes, people were complaining in the papers of the Lots Road power-station and its chimneys. Fumes, sulphur. She was aware of one particular privet bush, a gawky creature with an over-heavy top, that seemed to indulge in grotesque swayings and gestures. It reminded her somehow of an old woman with a wig, a wig that was always threatening to blow away, and the bush put up a claw to stave off the humiliation.

She had the seat to herself, for the north-east wind kept the world moving. People walked briskly with collars up or mufflers

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wound round throats. The clouds hurried, and the interminable traffic went up and down.

The wind soaked through her. She shivered, and accepted the protesting tremors, and presently the shivering ceased. She was cold and growing more cold, like a piece of warm metal thrown out upon a slag heap. Her hands and her feet grew numb.

A little group of common children went by, strident and red-faced. One of them stared at her. Fancy a funny old woman sitting on a seat just as though the leaves were out! Mary Summerhays smiled dimly at the child and at youth's uncomprehending curiosity.

"Aren't you at school?"

The small girl sniffed. Her bare knees were blue.

"No. Alf's got whooping-cough. Ain't it cold sitting there?"

"Just a little."

The child raced on to catch the others, and Mrs. Summerhays sat and watched that absurd privet bush clutching at its wig. An optimistic sparrow hopped round the seat, and fixing her with a black bead of an eye, hoped for crumbs. Its feathers were all fluffed up.

"Nothing doing, my dear."

The sparrow flew away. A big man striding past turned an observant and curious glance upon her. What sort of oddity was this, sitting there coatless on such a day? He passed, but pausing some twenty yards from the seat, turned and looked back. The humanity in him hesitated, but after all—it was no concern of his. You did not interfere with eccentric strangers.

The day grew more grey and dim, and the voice of Big Ben was heard booming four. Mrs. Summerhays made a little movement. Her fingers and her knees were stiff, and all sense of inward warmth had passed from her. She stood up. She felt congealed and

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frozen, and her first steps were tentative and mechanical. She seemed to move like some little tin toy progressing with queer, constricted carefulness. She tottered along out of the gardens, and managed to cross the road. She felt faint and sick with the cold. It took her twenty minutes to reach the grocer's shop at the corner of Pulteney Street.

Mrs. Bloom opened the door to her, a Mrs. Bloom who looked congested and shocked.

"My gracious, what have you been doing?"

Mrs. Summerhays made a chattering, icy sound.

"Just a little walk."

"And you went out without a coat! You must be—"

She grabbed at the uncertain, tottering figure in black. She drew her in. She touched one of the gloveless hands.

"Why—you're like a bit of ice. You must be mad, dearie. Come inside. It's puff-fectly ridiclous, you going out. Hold on to me."

"I'm just a little chilled."

"Chilled! You're like a bit of fish out of cold storage. I'll have you laid up—I shall. It's askin' for trouble. What did you do it for?"

Mrs. Summerhays smiled dimly, and was mute.

"You come upstairs at once. I'll put you in front of the fire with a quilt round you. My word, anyone'd think you'd done it on purpose."

III

Three days later a letter was posted in London addressed to Miss Summerhays at the Hotel Splendide, Beaulieu. Mrs. Bloom had obtained the address surreptitiously from a letter that she had found on Mrs. Summerhays' dressing-table, and though Mrs. Summerhays had panted: "No need to worry my daughter," Mrs.

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Bloom had thought otherwise. Mrs. Bloom's cramped calligraphy might have been accepted as indicating her mental limitations. Apparently it had not yet occurred to her that Britain and France were connected telegraphically, and that a telegram would have been so much more swift and simple. She had rushed at her crisis, sucked the nib of her pen, and with flurried earnestness indited that letter.

Mr. Henry Vane was *en route* for Genoa about the time that Mrs. Bloom's letter passed through Paris. The sea about Spezzia was all blue, and Vane stood in the corridor of the coach as the train travelled from sunlight into shadow. Tunnel after tunnel pierced the rocky coast, and those fleeting glimpses of sea and rock and sky were tantalizing and enthralling. Someone had christened this tunnelled way "The Flute," and fingers of light touched the orifices. There was a melody to Vane in the pulsations of sunlight and of darkness. The rumbling wheels of the coach played at diminuendo and crescendo. Almost his mood knew the same alternations, doubt and hope, sunlight and soot-stained rock, but hope prevailed. Those sweet and secret words of hers were with him. "I am so ashamed." As for place-names, surely Beaulieu should have its significance? The Hotel Splendide might be huge and meretricious, but for them it would be no more than a white cliff on the edge of reality. She understood; she had reached out a hand.

"Come. Sit by me again. Let us both remember and forget."

Vane broke the journey at Genoa, and that letter from the north gained a lap upon him. He both hastened and delayed, for this journey from Rome was not to be taken greedily, but should be sipped and savoured. These hours were exquisite; they had the quality of a summer dawn, gradual and secret. He spent two days in Genoa, wandering and dreaming, and even the crowds in the

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streets were different. They did not tantalize him or make him feel alien, a sort of ghost let out of Hades for a year and a day. He was part of this crowd's life, part of humanity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



*T*HE Hotel Splendide, vast and white and glittering like a berg stranded on the edge of the blue sea, palms, beds of cineraria like plush buttons attached to little green jackets of grass, mimosa, hot red tennis courts, a great river of shingle flowing past marble steps.

Elsie's first impression of the Hotel Splendide associated itself with the crackling of that shingle under the wheels of the hotel bus. She was the first to emerge when the porter opened the door. She was conscious of that towering iceberg of an hotel, and of Sally's blue eyes looking up at it as she lifted her out.

Sally exclaimed: "It's just like a Christmas cake for a very greedy god, Summer."

What an idea! But maybe Sally was wiser than she knew, and Mrs. Pym had a travelling headache, and a mood that was abrupt with everybody, especially with the hotel officials. They might be polite, sophisticated, cynical, just cream buns to be squelched by Mrs. Pym's casual candour.

"I know this place of yours. If you've given me rooms on the railway or the street—there's nothing doing."

She was assured that the managerial mind had not contemplated

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anything so crude, and she was conducted across an acre of carpet to the gilded gates of the lift. Her accessories followed her, Sally holding Miss Summerhays' hand. The lounge of the Splendide was not solacing to the shy. It was so vast, so full of large chairs and of people. The lift attendant had red plush breeches, white stockings and a braided coat.

Sally stared at him.

"Isn't that what they used to call a 'Jeames,' Summer?"

"Sssh, dear."

They went heavenwards with the suave young man from the reception bureau and the gentleman in the plush breeches.

Elsie had a back bedroom, which—of course—was inevitable and did not surprise her; but she did think it strange that a woman who asserted that she was short of ready cash should not be daunted by the Hotel Splendide. Elsie was not dauntless in the face of such splendour. It oppressed her, and she was so ready to feel oppressed. Mr. Vane had not replied to her letter, and her cheap fibre trunk looked as shamefaced as she felt in the presence of a large porter who waited rather ostentatiously for a tip. She had no *pourboire* to give him. She thanked him humbly and confusedly, and he departed.

Sally dashed in.

"Tea, Summer. We've got it in mother's room. She's going to lie down."

Elsie was not wanting to disturb Mrs. Pym. She was becoming more and more aware of herself as a financial encumbrance, and that Mrs. Pym looked at her as she might have looked at a slip of paper that arrived in an envelope with a halfpenny stamp on it. Account rendered.

"I don't think I want any tea, dear. And I don't suppose your mother—"

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"Oh, yes, she's on the aspirin bottle. You wait."

Sally dashed out and returned in two minutes with the whole tea-tray, a little flushed but victorious, and bumping her way past the door.

"I've sneaked it. Mother's got all she wants. Look at the googy cakes!"

"My dear, it's too heavy for you. Here, let me—"

"I'll put it on your trunk. Let's be pigs, Summer. Oh, googy—googy! You can have that pink one."

Miss Summerhays kissed the child. There was something comforting and elemental about Sally. It was nice even to be "googy" when your self was feeling hopelessly inferior.

Later, she went out to explore Beaulieu, leaving a cake-congested Sally to recover from too much tea. "Yes, I'll be quite good, Summer. I think I've had one too many." She hurried across the lounge, which was filling with a *thé dansant* crowd, and out over the shingle. She discovered the gardens of the Anse des Fourmis, and the coast path winding to the Port de St. Jean, and finding a seat on a little rocky promontory, she sat down. The light of the setting sun lay all along that mountainous coast with its white buildings and blue sea. The Tête de Chien was a benign and brooding forehead. Below it lay that fabulous and sinful place, Monte Carlo, full of social suicides and shot pigeons. In the distance Bordighera was like a flashing smile on the lips of the coming night.

Elsie brooded. She was so very innocent. She saw the headland of Monaco, and supposed it to be Monte Carlo, and to Elsie Monte Carlo was a city of strange and sensational sin. People gambled there. She imagined it to be full of desperate young men and gorgeous women who devoured those same young men, women with wonderful yellow hair. She did not suspect the gambling

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paradise of shabbiness, or see it full of shoddy people, surreptitious old men, shops that were like false teeth. Monte Carlo was a satanic thrill on the edge of her serious world.

She looked at Beaulieu and the great wall of rock behind it. Hotels, villas, the new casino, gardens, more villas, here and there a faint film of olives. Beaulieu had been different when the older world had christened it. Now, it was confectionery—Sally's iced cake for a greedy god, or a sort of conservatory arranged at the foot of that mountain wall. It had had its eyebrows plucked and its face lifted. It was full of permanent wave, and dental adaptations, and face cream and every sort of artificiality. It was beautiful and brilliant and boring, a thoroughly sophisticated person with an extensive wardrobe and a face like a whited sepulchre. It had one of those metallic, syncopated voices. The palms in the gardens might just as well have been made of tin.

But Elsie did not see anything of all this, nor was she ever to see it as it was. Her time was growing short. She sat on the edge of that purring sea, and thought of her letter to a man, and the silence that had followed it. Was it possible that her letter had gone astray, and that it was wandering from pigeon-hole to pigeon-hole in Italian hotels? That poor little letter of hers!

She had no knowledge of that other letter, the product of Pulteney Street and Mrs. Bloom. On this particular evening it had only just been written, and had been slipped into the mouth of a red pillar-box by Mrs. Bloom's red hand. Moreover, Elsie was troubled by other matters. She wanted money so very badly, money for mere trifles, a new toothbrush, stockings. Her shoes needed mending—and yet Mrs. Pym was staying at the Splendide. How very illogical it seemed. But Mrs. Pym had assured her rather irritably that funds would be in evidence in the course of a week, and her facial expression had suggested to Elsie that she—Elsie—

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should not be a nuisance.

"Governesses should be neither seen nor heard."

She left the seat and walked as far as St. Jean, and stood watching a small white steam yacht make its way into the harbour. The sun went down behind Cap Ferrat, and suddenly the sea was pearl grey, and quite black in the shadows under the rocks. The air grew chilly, and she remembered that this was the dangerous hour, and as she hurried back along the path a full moon lifted itself out of the sea, but on this evening the moon had no magic for her. She had left her luminary at Taormina, and however cunningly the silver net might close upon the pines and the olives, Elsie had lost her sentimental sandals.

The cold, clear dusk of Beaulieu brought her to the Splendide, whose white cornice looked even more like ice above a fillet of electric lights, and in the vestibule she met Mrs. Pym. Mrs. Pym had a letter in her hand. Her glance at Elsie was hostile.

"What, you've been out?"

"Yes."

"Where's the child?"

"I left her upstairs. She was rather tired."

Mrs. Pym flicked the letter to and fro like a fan.

"I suggest that you take your job a little more seriously. I don't want that other experience repeated."

Elsie's lips quivered.

"I'm sorry, but I must have a little time to myself."

"I never argue."

She moved away to a chair in the lounge, and Elsie crossed to the lift, feeling hurt and humiliated. If Mrs. Pym could speak to her like that in public, she might at least pay for the privilege of being offensive. And what, after all, was Mrs. Pym? A rather dubious and erotic little person who drifted from hotel to hotel.

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She found the lift man smiling at her. He was a friendly little person, much less formidable than his ornamental livery suggested.

"Which floor, madame?"

"Oh, the third, please."

She was carried up, feeling worried and indignant and thoroughly lonely. Life was very much at cross-purposes. She hurried along the wide corridor with its opulent carpet to her room, and was relieved to find no Sally there. Poor Sally! Poor Elsie! She locked herself in, and leaving the lights off sat down on the bed. She felt very miserable and vaguely and strangely oppressed. The edge of her bed was like the edge of a cliff, a precarious perch, and beneath her was a kind of blackness. But why this absurd depression, this almost morbid mood? Nothing was going to happen, though she had made such a sorry and futile mess of the thing that might have happened. Oh, why had she been such a shameful fool? Perhaps he had felt like this, all alone on the edge of nothingness, bitter and very sad. And perhaps he would never read her letter.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Pym was reading that other letter, and it produced in her raw-lipped rage. It came from her solicitors; it pointed out firmly and politely that Mrs. Pym's income was on trust; that it was a considerable and generous income, and that if the lady had outlived it she must economize. The capital was tied up, and the trustees took their responsibilities seriously. The bank would allow her to draw cheques to the value of one hundred pounds a month until Mrs. Pym's inflowing dividends had cleared the overdraft.

Mrs. Pym was very much annoyed.

Economize—indeed! Her trustees were a pair of old footlers. A woman with an income of some two thousand pounds a year expected to mess about in second-class hotels!

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Economize! Well, she would go to Monte Carlo and have a flutter, and be damned to them. She would seriously consider ridding herself of that Summerhays girl. She was getting a little above herself. She had too much forehead.

II

Most undoubtedly there was a slump in sentiment, and the Hotel Splendide was not a sentimental establishment. Its splendour was oppressive. It seemed to raise its plucked eyebrows at Elsie and ask itself what this shabby person was doing here, for unquestionably Elsie was shabby. Her two evening frocks had seen nearly four months' service, and they had never been anything but flimsy, and she was feeling bedraggled and inferior, and the Hotel Splendide was not sympathetic. It was so highly upholstered and magnificent that the very chairs were like brocaded dowagers peering through lorgnettes.

Elsie had another difference with Mrs. Pym. Mrs. Pym was going to Monte Carlo to dine and play, for the Splendide ran a bus service to Monte Carlo.

"You'll take the kid to dine downstairs."

Elsie had lunched in the dining-room of the Splendide, and the stately business had terrified her. The vast *salle-à-manger* had been alive with waiters, formidable waiters. She had been presented with the wine list, and had asked for water.

"Can't we dine upstairs?"

"Why?"

Mrs. Pym was collecting grievances, any little burr that would cling.

"They charge extra for meals upstairs. What's the matter with the dining-room? Isn't it posh enough?"

Elsie's chin quivered.

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"Yes, it's—too—opulent. My frocks aren't—"

"Don't be a fool. It will keep the kid amused."

"But really—I can't dress as one ought to—"

Mrs. Pym divined the diffident dun in Elsie, and made haste to quash the attack.

"Do you think anybody will notice what you are wearing? It is utterly unimportant. Of course, if you went down in your py-jamas—"

The docile Elsie flared.

"I might suggest—that if you, well—I could buy a new frock. Really, it's rather humiliating—"

Mrs. Pym flared even more frankly.

"Haven't I explained—that in a week or two—?"

"You said that in Rome."

"And I'm saying it here. I feed you and sleep you and pay for your laundry. You'll have to wait."

"Oh, very well—but I should have thought—"

"It's not your business to think. Don't worry me. I've quite enough to worry about. And you'll take the kid down to dinner."

Elsie's chin quivered even more helplessly. She felt hot about the eyes, absurdly hot. She was on the edge of blubbing. Her voice became emotional.

"Very well. But—I—I think it's very unkind of you. You—you don't seem to understand—"

Now she was blubbing, and the little yellow-headed virago in Mrs. Pym exulted. She was the mother of the original and untamed Sally.

"Don't get hysterical. I can't stand that sort of thing. It's perfectly absurd. It isn't as if you were on the streets. It's just silly."

Elsie recovered herself as though she had been flicked with a towel.

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"I beg your pardon. I think that I had better—"

"Take a couple of aspirins, my dear, and don't—think. I can't wait now to listen to all this. But you'll take the kid down to dinner."

Mrs. Pym dined at the one place in Monte Carlo where she should not have dined when the state of her finances was considered, but she needed a tonic. Life had been distinctly ragged for the last two months, and being thoroughly out of temper she cast around for a victim. There were occasions when her mentality was that of the spoilt child in a nursery. She would have her screaming fit and smash toys. Well, there was Elsie to hand, an underling who was not paid to be emotional, but whose business in life was to suffer the stresses of other people's emotions. If the damned girl made any more fuss she should get it in the neck.

Mrs. Pym allowed herself half a bottle of champagne, which was not wise. She entered the casino in a combative temper, and the official formalities annoyed her. The gentleman to whom she produced her passport was in a facetious mood, and Mrs. Pym's age was recorded as twenty-seven.

"Madame does not look her age."

Impertinent young gigolo! Was he trying to be fresh with her? She snubbed him, and departing with her pass made her way into the gaming-room. She reconnoitred the room before choosing a table, but she had to wait for a vacant place. Stake standing, not she! She sat down with her bag in her lap between an elderly person in black and a man who looked like a discouraged actor. The champagne was strong in her and she was in a mood to flaunt her fortune, to plank her stakes down *en plein*. She was playing—not to the table, but to confound those footling old gentlemen who were privileged to be her trustees.

She lost. Only once did one of her numbers turn up, the nine,

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and she had a miserable twenty francs on it. In the course of an hour or so she lost some four thousand francs, and the champagne had lost its sparkle. The room was insufferably stuffy, and the dark person on her right smelt like a corpse. She looked in her bag, and supposed that she had about two thousand francs left. Her hard little hands snapped the catch of the bag. She got up, and somebody slipped into her place.

She did not feel angry with herself or call herself a fool. Her luck was out, that was all, and she was beginning to have a headache. She would come over again to-morrow, and find herself in a better mood for it. If only she had had something solid planked on that confounded nine!

She returned to the Splendide about midnight in a very bad temper, and as she undressed her bad temper found a dummy on which to hang its clothes. She would get rid of Miss Summerhays. But she owed Miss Summerhays money. Oh, well, she would write the girl a cheque and leave her to negotiate it as best she could. Probably there were people in Beaulieu who would be glad to give an English girl some temporary job, especially when she could speak the language.

Meanwhile, Miss Summerhays and Sally had dined in state, but much earlier than was fashionable, and Elsie had found the waiters much less formidable than they had seemed. She and the child were cared for by a little stout Italian with a high colour and a Punch's nose, who was very much the man of the world, and who filled Elsie's glass with water without her asking for it.

He was a fatherly person. He spoke very good English, and he made friends with Sally. Yes, he knew London and Brighton and Harrogate. He knew the Prince of Wales. In summer he presided over the American bar of an hotel at Le Touquet.

Sally christened him "Mr. Punch." She told Mr. Punch that

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her mother had gone to Monte to make a lot of money, and Mr. Punch caught Elsie's eye.

"Yes, perhaps she will break the bank, my dear, perhaps not. Now what about a little strawberry ice?"

Sally had her ice, and Summer's ice for an encore, for Elsie was not feeling like ices, and the Italian was kind to Elsie. She worked for her living; she looked tired and unhappy. Would the lady prefer a chocolate *soufflé*? Couldn't he persuade her to some *pâtisserie*? No. Well, a little dessert? Yes, the grapes were very good.

He was a kind person, far kinder than the Hotel Splendide, and she had a feeling that he could transcend the ten per cent and any additional largess. He took her back to Italy, and a balcony above the Borghese Gardens, and the poor little romance that she had muddled so badly. She told him that they had come from Rome.

Rome! Rome! He was a Roman; he had a wife and two children living in the Trastevere quarter, two *bambini*, one of them just as long as that. He measured off a space between his two hands. And then more "Splendides" arrived at the next table and he dashed off to attend to them, and Sally was still wallowing in her second ice.

"Isn't he funny!"

Elsie thought him rather a dear.

"What's he keep his family at Rome for, Summer?"

"I expect he can't afford to have them here. Travelling is expensive, you know."

"Then why doesn't he stay and wait in Rome?"

"Perhaps he makes more money here."

"It must be a nuisance, Summer, not having much money."

"It is, dear."

Sally went to bed like a seraph, and Elsie was glad to go to her

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own room. She was tired and sad and worried. Had that letter of hers really gone astray? Had she and Vane passed from each other like ships in the night? He might never know that she had flashed him a signal. "I am so ashamed." Yes, she supposed that she might never see him again, and that he would always think of her as a wretched and conventional little snob who had run away from her reality.

She undressed slowly and got into bed. She found herself confronting the problem of Mrs. Pym and Mrs. Pym's increasing hostility. Did the woman want to get rid of her? And could she bear much longer with Mrs. Pym? The whole affair was so humiliating.

But there was Sally. Strange that she should cling to Sally, but she did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



ELSIE and Sally were at breakfast when a *chasseur* with an armful of letters and papers knocked at the door, and it was Sally who ran to open it. The *chasseur* handed her a single letter with "87" scrawled in blue pencil upon the corner of a very cheap white envelope.

"It's for you, Summer."

Miss Summerhays was refilling her coffee-cup, and in that moment of suspense and of hope she spilt some of the coffee on the tray.

"Bring it, dear."

Would she see an Italian stamp upon the envelope? And when Sally put the letter in her lap she shirked looking at it for a moment. And then she looked and her eyebrows drew together a little, and she saw a red and a brown stamp with the head of King George upon them, and the handwriting was both clumsy and unfamiliar. The red stamp had been put on crooked. She was conscious of a pang of disappointment.

She replaced the coffee-pot on the tray.

"How silly of me! I've spilt some."

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She stared at the letter lying in her lap. Who could it be from? That uneducated, unsteady scrawl. Sally had returned to her chair on the other side of the table, and over her cup she watched Summer take up the letter and open it, and suddenly Summer's face seemed to go all funny. She sat very still, reading, and her eyes looked big.

"You've got a bill, Summer."

Miss Summerhays did not appear to catch the remark. She pushed her chair back, got up, and put a hand to her head. Sally's round blue eyes grew more intent. Yes, obviously, there was something very unpleasant in that letter, something more devastating than a bill. And then Miss Summerhays made a swift movement towards the door. She looked as white as the paint.

Sally got off her chair.

"It's not a nice letter, Summer?"

The girl glanced at her momentarily as though Sally was just a blur.

"No, dear. It means I've got to go at once. Someone's ill. Just stay and finish your breakfast."

She was out of the room and had closed the door before Sally could find anything more to say. She hurried along the corridor to the door of Mrs. Pym's room. She knocked, and Mrs. Pym's voice was not welcoming.

"Who's there?"

"Miss Summerhays."

"What do you want?"

But Elsie forgot that she had resolved to be careful in her opening of Mrs. Pym's door. This was her affair and it was urgent, and she burst in to find Mrs. Pym sitting up in bed with a breakfast-tray and very unprepared for other people's troubles. Her lace cap was awry, and her face looked messy.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

"I've just had a letter. I must go home—at once."

Mrs. Pym's face had all the sourness of the morning after. She had lost four thousand francs, and was feeling raddled, and she did not ask for other people's emotions in the middle of breakfast.

"My mother's ill—dangerously ill."

"Where?"

"In London. I'm sorry to have to leave you like this, but, of course, you'll understand—"

Mrs. Pym did understand. She saw what was gathering behind Elsie's emotion, and suddenly she felt exasperated. The little sadist in her sat there abed, controlling the situation, ready to play at cat and mouse. Here was someone to whom she could pass on her sour cream.

"Most inconvenient. What—exactly—is the matter?"

"Pneumonia."

Mrs. Pym poured out more coffee.

"Who's the letter from?"

Elsie might be looking bewildered and frightened, but her urge blundered through Mrs. Pym's defences.

"Her landlady. I must go and pack. I shall want my money, please."

The mouse was out, and Mrs. Pym's pale eyelashes flickered.

"I want to see the letter."

Elsie's eyes seemed to grow large.

"The letter! But—really—"

Mrs. Pym's hand was out, and Elsie gave her the letter. She stood and watched Mrs. Pym reading it, and the sort of hard and blue-eyed edge to that unfinished face.

"The woman can't spell. The doctor ought to have written. So—you mean to go?"

"Oh, of course, as early as possible."

TWO BLACK SHEEP

Mrs. Pym laid the letter on the blue-and-gold eiderdown.

"Rather awkward. I can't give you cash."

"But I must have some money."

"I'll give you a cheque."

"But—a cheque's no use. You must understand. It's—life and death."

Mrs. Pym raised her coffee-cup.

"Sorry. I was at Monte last night, and they cleared me right out."

Elsie was breathing like a creature in distress. She went a little nearer to the bed.

"Do you mean—you have no money?"

"Haven't I told you?"

"But you must have some money. What am I to do? Surely—the hotel will cash a cheque for you?"

"I've tried them. Nothing doing."

"Then—what's the use of you offering me a cheque?"

"It's good value in England. It's no use getting into a state."

"But—I must have money. You owe me money. Can't you do something? You must do something! You've got jewellery, lots of things. I insist on—"

Mrs. Pym drawled at her.

"Do I understand that you expect me to go to the pawnshop for you? Indeed! That's a nice proposition. Now, don't go off the deep end. I'll tell you what to do. I'll write you this cheque. Take a taxi to Nice and see the British consul, and explain the thing to him. They advance money in cases like this. I'll give you your taxi fare."

Elsie stood bewildered. She put a hand to her forehead, that serious forehead that was so inadequate in moments of stress.

"You really mean that I must go to the consul?"

TWO BLACK SHEEP

"Of course. That's what consuls are for. You can get the address from the concierge."

"I shall lose the whole morning."

"That won't make much difference. The best trains are in the afternoon. You'll be in England to-morrow."

"It's only a few pounds. Surely—you—?"

Mrs. Pym was enjoying the baiting of Elsie. She was provoked by the sensitive silliness of Elsie. What a flabby ass the girl was! Let her go squawking into Nice like an agitated and long-legged hen, and lay an egg in the English consulate. Probably they would be impressed by the obvious integrity of a young woman with such a forehead, and fit her out with a second-class ticket to London.

"Well—I shouldn't waste any time. Go and get the consul's address from the concierge and ask him to phone for a taxi. Yes—I can manage fifty francs. And I'll have a cheque ready for you. How much is it?"

"Ten weeks. Thirty pounds."

"All right. Go down and see the concierge, and look in here before you go."

"Perhaps I had better do my packing first."

"Of course not. Make sure of the ticket money."

Really, the girl had no head at all in a crisis. She just became emotional and blathered at you, and when Elsie had hurried out Mrs. Pym finished her breakfast. She supposed that she would be usefully rid of Miss Summerhays without the wasting of ready cash, and though Sally would be left on her hands, Sally might be expected to behave like the new Sally. She would tell the kid that Elsie was coming back again in a fortnight. She got out of bed, and glancing at her early-morning face in a mirror, she grimaced at it. Yes, she was looking rather raw and puffy. She opened a drawer and took out a cheque-book and her handbag. The Splen-

TWO BLACK SHEEP

dide provided a pen and ink and note-paper in its bedrooms, and Mrs. Pym sat down at the writing-table and drew a cheque. She extracted a fifty-franc note from her bag and slipped it and the cheque into an envelope.

Yes, what an ass the girl was! No *nous*, no guts. And in these days, too, when women were learning to get their fingers on life and to hold fast and give life's tail a twist if need be. But probably she would be able to convince the English consul. She was a silly, serious, emotional ass in distress, and men rather liked that sort of ass. They flattered the vanity of the male.

Then Elsie reappeared in a hat and coat, and somewhat breathless. She would always be breathless on such occasions.

"Oh, I've got the address, and a taxi is coming. I shall have to catch the two-forty-seven train. There is second-class on that."

Mrs. Pym was attending to her face. She extended a hand that held a blob of cotton wool in the direction of the table.

"There's the cheque and a fifty-franc note in that envelope. You had better show the consul that letter about your mother."

"Yes, of course."

"Send the kid in to me."

"Yes, I will."

II

The taxi carried Elsie along the dusty road to Nice, and Villafranche Bay was very blue and Cap Ferrat like some primeval monster sunning itself in the sea. Elsie sat with her hands clasped in her lap, and felt that the taxi was not travelling fast enough, though French chauffeurs cannot be accused of loitering. Mrs. Bloom's letter was in her handbag, and her thoughts were hurrying along Pulteney Street to the house where her mother lay ill. Mrs. Bloom's scrawling letter had painted for Elsie a pathetic

TWO BLACK SHEEP

picture of her mother, and the very crudeness of Mrs. Bloom's pity made for reality, a bed-sitting-room in a shabby street and a breathless woman in bed.

"She hasn't been well for a long time, but I don't suppose she told you. She's one of the quiet, unselfish sort. She hasn't taken her food properly for weeks. She's grown so thin and yellow. Last Thursday she went out in a bitter wind without her coat. It was asking for trouble. The doctor's been twice to-day. Come quickly."

Those last two words seemed to be part of the rhythm of her heart-beats. Quickly, quickly! And the casual callousness of that other woman! For Elsie was beginning to be more sensitive to the sadist in Mrs. Pym. It was as though she had felt numb and inarticulate in Mrs. Pym's room, and too ready to accept in her distress the other woman's negative excuses. All that she needed was seven or eight hundred francs, and yet Mrs. Pym's large and luxurious room had offered her nothing but a cheque on London. It wasn't quite credible or convincing, and in Elsie's consciousness a little red patch of anger began to burn.

The taxi trundled down the hill into Nice, and in the sunlight Nice looked unexpectedly shabby. It had a dustiness, whiteness without glamour, and it was no more alluring than the back of Brighton. She sat and waited for the office of the English consul and her crisis. She tried to feel convinced that she would find sympathy there and, what was more important, the price of a second-class ticket to London.

At last the taxi stopped outside the consulate, and she got out and told the man to wait.

"I shall not be very long."

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The promise was to be truer than she dreamed. She went in with lips trembling with the words that she had rehearsed, and in the outer office she stood listening to a voice. It told her that the English consul was not in Nice; he was away for three days. She stood there looking flurried and frightened.

"But what am I to do? I must get to England."

She explained her case to the clerk, confusedly, feverishly, and he listened and was sympathetic. He was sorry, but he had no authority to advance her money. So many people came to borrow money, and in most cases it was never returned.

She pleaded.

"But I'm genuine. Here is the letter, and my employer's cheque. What am I to do?"

The clerk glanced at the letter and the cheque.

"There is the vice-consul at Mentone. Try Mentone."

"But will he help me?"

"Perhaps. You can put your case to him."

She was a little stupefied, bewildered.

"How far is it to Mentone?"

"About twelve miles."

"Will you give me the address?"

He wrote it down for her, and she hurried out to her waiting taxi, and explained to the driver that the English consul was away, and that she must go to Mentone. Would he drive her to Mentone, and quickly? He did not demur. A client collected from the Hotel Splendide could be considered solvent.

"What address, mademoiselle?"

She showed him the paper.

So back they went through Beaulieu along the lower Corniche road, and Elsie and Monte Carlo met for the first time. She was not in a state to do justice to Monte Carlo either æsthetically or

TWO BLACK SHEEP

ethically, save to remember Mrs. Pym's excuses. She had one glimpse of the casino and that green canal with its hectic grass and trees and beds of cineraria, and of a very ornamental gendarme controlling the traffic. She remembered that Mrs. Pym had lost precious money in that building—money, some of which might and should have been hers. She was beginning to feel bitter against Mrs. Pym, and this bitterness was new to Elsie, and as exciting as strong wine to a head that was unused to it. The failure at Nice seemed to have quickened her heart-beats.

They came to Mentone, the maiden aunt of a pleasure resort, and the chauffeur dropped her outside the house where the vice-consul had his office. She entered a little less confidently than at Nice, and conscious of herself as a shabby young stranger about to ask for money. She felt confused, and none too sure of her lips and her tongue.

Yet all that she had to say was "I want to see the vice-consul, please," and she said it, and gripped her handbag hard, and watched the face of the clerk, and even before he had answered her she had a horrid feeling that she was about to be disappointed.

"Sorry, he is not in."

Her fingers tightened on her bag.

"When will he be in? It's most important."

The clerk was rather vague. The consul was out on business; he had gone to Roquebrune to investigate a case that concerned him; he might be lunching at Roquebrune, therefore he might not be back at the office until half-past two.

Elsie's lips began to quiver.

"But it's so terribly important."

Again she explained her case, and all that the clerk could suggest was that she should call again later. Possibly the consul might return from Roquebrune about twelve.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

"But couldn't you telephone him?"

"He is engaged on a rather important case. You are sure to find him here in the afternoon."

She went out feeling that the world was treating her very badly, and that Mrs. Pym was at the back of all this anguish of delay. The insufferable selfishness of the woman! And then Elsie had trouble with her taxi-driver. When she explained the situation to him, he became talkative and truculent; he had to pick up another client at the Hotel Splendide at two o'clock, and there was the question of dinner. The lady would have to pay him and release him, and engage another car or return by train or tram.

Something hardened in Elsie. She was about to open her bag and take out that precious fifty-franc note when the justifiable lie suggested itself. Let Mrs. Pym be responsible. She could afford to squander money—Elsie's money—at Monte.

She said: "Get the concierge at the hotel to pay you. It will be put down to us."

The arrangement was a usual one, but the man protested. And he wanted a *pourboire*.

Almost, Elsie's mouth was the mouth of Mrs. Pym.

"I have come out without my purse. You will have to go to the concierge. I will leave a *pourboire* with him, and you can collect it."

These women! The taxi-driver had had experience of ladies without purses, and the uselessness of arguing with them. And, after all, he would get his money from the concierge. The Hotel Splendide did not disoblige its clients, and its bad debts were negligible.

He scowled and drove off, leaving Elsie the mistress of fifty francs and a white lie, and somehow gloating over it. That little sore spot of anger was spreading.

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She walked to the sea-front and sat down near the bandstand, and the band was playing, but sitting did not satisfy her. She was becoming the creature of a resentful restlessness. All these people with money, and she had just fifty francs. And then she was penetrated by that sudden thought. What if that execrable, brazen-headed little cat had been lying to her? It was possible; it was more than possible; it was probable. Mrs. Pym might be preserving a little hoard for further adventures at Monte Carlo. Elsie got up. She removed herself from the music of that blatant band. Her tremors had ceased to be cold tremors. And then she found herself in a crowded street and outside the offices of Thomas Cook & Son.

She hesitated; she went in and, striving to appear calm and casual, she addressed herself to the young man who dealt with finance. She produced Mrs. Pym's cheque, and slipped it under the grille.

"Will you cash that for me?"

He examined both the cheque and her face. He was a nice lad, but business was business.

"I'm sorry, but we can't cash strange cheques."

"I have my passport here."

"I'm sorry. You see—probably it is quite all right, but we have to send the cheque to England."

"How long would it take?"

"Oh, about a week."

She understood that it would be useless to argue. She picked up the cheque, put it in her bag and walked out. She went back to the sea-front and sat down on a seat by some bushes. An elderly gentleman, obviously English, was sitting next her reading a paper. She spoke to him.

"Could you tell me the time?"

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He pulled out a watch.

"Twenty minutes to twelve."

As late as that! She thanked him, and rising, made her way back to the vice-consul's office. No, he had not returned, but she might wait for half an hour. She waited, and each heartbeat seemed to strike a note of muffled anger and impatience. She would miss that two o'clock train, but there was another at five, and then she remembered that the five was a *luxe* train. No second-class.

How maddening! The hands of the office clock touched twelve, and the consul still tarried.

A voice addressed her: "You had better come back about two. He won't be here now."

Yes, it was the luncheon hour, and she went out and found an English tea-shop where they served light lunches. She allowed herself a cup of coffee, a *brioche* and some ham. She broke into that precious fifty-franc note, and the act seemed to intensify the anger that was growing in her. For the first time in her life she was beginning to see the world floating in a red aura.

At two o'clock she returned to the consulate and sat there for half an hour. Would the wretched man never come! At twenty minutes to three the clerk was called up on the telephone and once more she hoped, but her hope was to be dashed.

"I'm sorry, but the consul has had to go to Nice; he is speaking from Nice."

She jumped up.

"Oh, may I speak to him? Please—"

But at that very moment the exchange cut them off.

The clerk smiled a dusty and disillusioned smile. He rang up the Nice consulate, but by the time he was put through, that elusive and hard-worked official had vanished. They were told that he

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had gone to interview the chief of the Nice police.

"I'm afraid you have no luck."

She agreed, and suddenly she found herself raging against three frittering formalities. She walked out of the office and stood for a moment on the pavement. Yes, she would go back to Beaulieu and have it out with that woman. She would insist upon being provided with funds for her journey. She felt that she could tear one of the rings off Mrs. Pym's useless fingers.

She found a taxi rank, and spoke to one of the drivers.

"Hotel Splendide, Beaulieu."

On the way back they had a puncture, and the chauffeur had to change a wheel. It was the last exasperation. She sat and waited, and her impatience became like some gnawing pain. She felt that she was losing control of herself, and that at any moment she would flare up like Sally in one of her elemental rage storms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



It was four o'clock when the taxi rattled over the shingle of the Hotel Splendide. Elsie paid the man, and in the vestibule she paused to speak to the concierge and to ask him about trains. Yes, she was leaving at once for England—a relative was ill. She could not catch the *Luxe* at five, for she had her packing to do, and what was the next train?

"The six forty-two. A *rapide*."

"First and second class?"

"Yes."

Politely he mentioned the matter of the taxi; he had paid the chauffeur and given him a *pourboire*, and if the lady was leaving she would, of course, wish to settle the account.

"Please put it down to Mrs. Pym, No. 70. Yes, I took the taxi on her instructions."

She had an account of her own to settle with Mrs. Pym, and she did not take the lift but climbed the stairs, and as she went up the grand staircase Mrs. Pym and Sally descended in the lift. The Hotel Splendide ran a very popular *thé dansant*, and in order to

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secure a table it was necessary to be there in good time. Elsie went straight to Mrs. Pym's room and knocked, and getting no answer she tried the door. It was locked and Mrs. Pym had taken the key with her.

More delay, more exasperation! The *femme de chambre* was coming down the corridor, and Elsie called to her.

"Is the lady out?"

The *femme de chambre* was friendly. In all probability Mrs. Pym had gone down to the *thé dansant*.

"You might unlock the door for me, please."

The *femme de chambre* did so. She saw no reason why the English governess should not enter her employer's room.

It was in its usual state of untidiness, for though Mrs. Pym had the whole day to do things in, she produced nothing but disorder. She left clothes about on chairs, and sometimes on the floor, and from the state of the bed Elsie could infer that the lady had been resting after lunch. The pillows were crumpled and the quilt half off the bed, and a pair of slippers, kicked off at random, lay like a couple of little animals that had been shot while trying to escape. The room had a stuffiness, for the *chauffage* was on, and the windows closed. It smelt suggestively of scent.

Elsie closed the door. Her feeling of bitterness against Mrs. Pym included that touzled bed, and the very smell of the other woman. The red, raw mouth and the brassy head. Beast! All the exasperations and disappointments of the day blazed up in Elsie. "Come quickly." What did that other woman care? What if she had money concealed and had lied to her? It was more than likely. She had fobbed her off with a fifty-franc note and that useless cheque, and dressed herself up and gone down to dance. There was a nice young Russian refugee attached as a gigolo to the Hotel Splendide.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

Elsie was tempted; or rather she was provoked by the blind yet instant urge of her necessity. Supposing the woman had the money? Supposing it was in this very room? She crossed quickly to the dressing-table, opened a drawer, and found it full of characteristic disorder. Gloves, handkerchiefs, stockings. She thrust a hand into the disorder and touched reality—an object that lay concealed beneath all this casualness. Mrs. Pym's bag. Her fingers closed on it; she stood rigid, hesitant, and then her anger hardened.

She placed her own bag on the dressing-table. She drew out Mrs. Pym's bag, opened it, and saw the usual objects sacred to the titivating of a complexion. She opened the inner pocket, and saw what she had expected to see—money—a wad of hundred-franc notes, and a smaller wad of more precious paper. The money was here. That beast of a woman had lied to her.

For a moment Elsie stood very still. She was conscious of doing that which was her right. Part of this money belonged to her, and not only because she needed it so desperately and not for her mere self, she would leave that cheque in Mrs. Pym's bag, and change it for ready cash.

Hurriedly she unfolded the notes. She counted them—three thousand, seven hundred francs. And the woman had left them here in a drawer at the mercy of the *femme de chambre* or the valet! Was that the kind of value she attached to money—stuff that was the very blood of life to people in pain and in trouble? Infamous, heartless, lying little beast! And with deliberation Elsie counted out a thousand francs, one note of five hundred, and five of a hundred. She took what she would need for the immediate crisis and no more. She stuffed the rest of the money back into Mrs. Pym's bag, and she had the remaining notes in her left hand when a key turned in the lock.

The door opened.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

She beheld her crisis—and Mrs. Pym.

II

She was aware of Mrs. Pym closing the door and standing with her back to it, a Mrs. Pym who was exquisitely gowned but whose frock was a more finished production than her face. Her blue eyes were open very wide. Her upper lip seemed to writhe back from her teeth.

"How very—interesting!"

But Elsie, who was suffering from a sense of outrage, and full of her righteous exasperations, saw Mrs. Pym as an insolent and painted lie. She would leave the lady with something to remember. She would tell Sally's mother exactly what she thought of her.

She said: "I had an idea that you had lied to me. You had the money all the time. You tried to pass that cheque off on me just when you knew it was so terribly urgent for me to go home."

She accused. She spoke with pale but deliberate lips. She was confronting an immeasurable meanness and scorning it, but that was not Mrs. Pym's attitude towards the crisis. She was far more quick than Elsie to grasp its final implications and to use them; she had Miss Highbrow caught and cornered, and all the world's conventions were at her service.

"You damned thief!"

She saw Elsie wince. A little flickering shadow seemed to pass across the girl's face.

"That's abominable. You owed me the money. You knew—"

"I did not quite imagine that you—"

"You have owed me the money for weeks, and when I wanted it in this emergency you lied to me."

Ostentatiously Mrs. Pym held the door, and the bell was close to her hand.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

She said: "I don't want any bluff. It was bad luck for you that I had forgotten something and happened to come upstairs. You can put those notes of mine down. How much have you pinched?"

Elsie appeared to hesitate. Her face looked darker. She picked up her own bag and proceeded to place the notes in it.

"I have returned the cheque. It is in your bag. I have taken just a thousand francs. You owe me much more than that, but I only want to get to England. I am catching the six o'clock train."

Mrs. Pym sneered.

"I—think—not. I believe that letter was a fake, part of a put-up job. What else have you got in that bag of yours?"

Elsie stared at her.

"What do you mean?"

"There was some jewellery in that drawer."

"How dare you suggest—!"

"Open your bag. Turn it upside down over the bed. Go on, be quick about it. No nonsense."

Elsie began to tremble.

"How dare you!"

"Now don't get excited. You are going to disgorge. Yes, you dirty little thief. I have kept you all these months. Open that bag. Do you hear?"

Her voice began to rip silk. She was the mother of Sally, mistress of her scene and enjoying it.

"You dirty little thief. Catching the six o'clock train, are you? I don't think."

And suddenly Elsie understood. She was in a corner, in a self-sprung trap, and this little vixen held the door.

She made a movement, looked confused, hesitated.

"Yes, I am catching that train. Don't talk such nonsense. Will you please stand out of the way?"

TWO BLACK SHEEP

Mrs. Pym snarled at her.

"Not bloody likely. You are not leaving this room, my dear. I'm not sugar, I can tell you. I'll have the management up, and the police. You damned little thief!"

And then Elsie Summerhays began to lose her head. She saw Mrs. Pym as sometimes the child Sally had seen her, perhaps as Sally had seen her in the lounge of the Hotel San Niccolo, as something vicious and raw-mouthed and cruel, twisting an arm and an occasion. Elsie went white where Sally would have gone red. Her dark eyes ceased to be sane.

"Get out of my way, please. My mother's ill. Don't try to stop me."

She moved across the room towards Mrs. Pym, and Mrs. Pym's hand went to the bell.

"No, you don't, my dear."

"Don't ring—I'm going."

"You're not. Get away—"

Inevitably the scuffle at the door became a struggle, for when Elsie took Mrs. Pym by the shoulders and tried to push her aside, Mrs. Pym's hands went up. She struck Elsie on the mouth, and Elsie lost the last remnant of her self-control. Her one purpose or impulse was to fight her way past Mrs. Pym, and to escape, just as a cat claws and struggles to escape from the sack or the hamper, and Mrs. Pym fought back. Her little red face was close to Elsie's, lips retracted, teeth showing. Mrs. Pym's frock split at the shoulder, and the flesh appeared. Elsie's hat was off, and one of Mrs. Pym's hands fastened in her hair.

There was blood on Elsie's mouth. She felt her hair being torn and twisted.

"Let go. Let me out!"

The red mouth spat at her, and Elsie's face became wild, dev-

TWO BLACK SHEEP

astated. Her eyes looked blind. She struck blow after blow, and she was stronger than she knew. She was aware of the little red face sinking, the blue eyes growing glazed. They were clear of the door now, and struggling against the wall, and suddenly Mrs. Pym slid sideways; her head struck the edge of a wardrobe.

Elsie, panting, a trickle of blood on her chin, her hair like a mop, stood and stared at her lying there. Mrs. Pym's toes stuck up; one arm looked twisted; she had a red stain on her forehead, and suddenly Elsie's anger went from her. She shivered; she felt cold. She was horribly and remorsefully sane. She went down on her knees beside Sally's mother, and put a hand under her head.

"Mrs. Pym, Mrs. Pym—wake up. I didn't mean—"

The door opened, and she was aware of two faces looking down at her, the faces of the valet and the *femme de chambre*. She heard herself addressing the two faces.

"She hit her head. Get some water. Get a towel."

The valet brought her a towel wetted at the tap, and she bathed Mrs. Pym's face.

"An accident, mademoiselle?"

"Yes. Oh, shut the door. She'll be herself in a minute. Wet the towel again."

The valet and the *femme de chambre* exchanged glances. This was a nice affair for the Hotel Splendide, two dishevelled women, and one of them unconscious.

The valet closed the door, and just as he closed it Mrs. Pym opened her eyes, and looked at the three of them. One of her hands raised itself and pushed the wet towel away. Her returning consciousness recovered its rage.

Her mouth looked all twisted. Almost she screamed.

"This woman has tried to murder me. I caught her taking my money. Fetch the manager, fetch the manager."

TWO BLACK SHEEP

She raised herself in the angle between the wall and the wardrobe.

"Get away from me, you thief. Take her away from me. Fetch the manager. Don't let her escape."

Elsie sat on her heels with the wet towel trailing across her knees. She was beginning to look bewildered.

"It's not true. You struck me."

"You liar. Look in her bag. No—don't touch anything. Fetch the manager. I want the police."

The valet and the *femme de chambre* eyed each other. Obviously, something had to be done, and the manager was the person to deal with such a scandal. The valet moved to the door, but Mrs. Pym stopped him. She was on her feet.

"No, you stay here. The woman's dangerous. She tried to kill me. You go, *femme de chambre*."

Elsie was still on her knees, looking dazed and most undangerous. Her hands held the towel.

"It's not true. I—"

Mrs. Pym glared at her, and went and sat on the bed.

III

The manager of the Hotel Splendide was a tall, blond Frenchman, very suave, very cold, very much the diplomat, who had spent many years in refusing to allow people to make him lose his temper. *Toujours la politesse*, an urbanity, a well-groomed reasonableness which held itself aloof, and with a pair of frigid blue eyes reduced the over-excited and the querulous to impotence. He entered the room, surveyed it, and bowed slightly to Mrs. Pym. The *femme de chambre* had explained the situation to him in the lift.

Elsie, looking exceedingly unharmed, if somewhat dishev-

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elled, was sitting on a bedroom chair, and still holding the towel. Obviously, the devil had gone out of her, leaving her weak, confused and voiceless, like a child overwhelmed by the strange and the unexpected. The manager observed her, a rather anæmic young woman who had the air of having just recovered from a fainting attack.

But Mrs. Pym's brassy head retained the glare of the late conflagration. If she assumed indignation it was both righteous and logical. She might be relentless and vindictive, but she had recovered her drawl.

"Monsieur le Directeur, I found this woman in my room taking money from my handbag. When I tried to keep her from escaping she attacked me. I managed to ring the bell. The valet and the *femme de chambre* will tell you that they found me lying on the floor unconscious."

The manager's blue eyes were intelligently cold. Yes, obviously the lady's face had suffered. An affair of Le Box! His poise and his English were adequate.

"Your governess, I believe, madame?"

Mrs. Pym applied a handkerchief moistened with scent to a rapidly closing eyelid.

"She was. There is her bag. If you look you will find the money in it. She had been at my drawer. You may find other things in the bag."

The manager picked up the bag, opened it, glanced rather casually at its contents, and returned it to the dressing-table. He addressed Elsie.

"Mademoiselle may wish to explain."

He observed the governess's flickering eyelashes and tremulous chin. Yes, this was a very inoffensive-looking thief, one of those rather soft-headed and soft-hearted women who, in a crisis, sur-

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prised themselves and everybody else.

"Mademoiselle—?"

She spoke with an air of breathlessness.

"She owed me the money. She told me a lie. She said she had no money. You see, I have to go suddenly to England. My mother is very ill."

Mrs. Pym wriggled sceptical shoulders.

"That's her version, monsieur. She showed me a letter, but I had my doubts about the letter. It struck me—"

Elsie's voice broke in poignantly.

"The letter is genuine. You can see it. My mother's landlady wrote it. She told me to come at once, and you see—I hadn't any money. I asked her for the money she owed me."

"Did you owe her money, madame?"

"I had given her a cheque."

Monsieur le Directeur stood firmly on his feet, completely in control of himself and the situation. An unfortunate explosion! One of the ladies had a head of brass, and the other had lost her head. But as the director of the Hotel Splendide he was, in a sense, the Splendide. He thought always and intelligently of his hotel, of the conventions, of himself, of his board of directors, of the carpets and the cuisine, the de luxe atmosphere. Such a world as the Splendide should not be subjected to meteoric clashes. It was upholstered against such crudities.

He addressed Elsie, and with impersonal politeness.

"So, mademoiselle did take the notes from madame's drawer?"

Her widely open eyes met his.

"Yes, because she owed me the money. She had given me a cheque, but it was no good to me. No one would cash it."

"Was the door of madame's room locked?"

Mrs. Pym answered that question.

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"Yes. I had the key with me."

"Then how did mademoiselle—?"

The *femme de chambre* stood forward.

"She asked me to unlock the door for her, monsieur."

"And you unlocked it?"

"Yes, monsieur, since mademoiselle was madame's *gouvernante*. Madame had gone down to the *thé dansant*."

The manager turned again to Elsie.

"Mademoiselle, do you admit that you entered madame's room in her absence and took money from her bag?"

"Yes, but she owed me the money. She admits it."

"You do not deny that you helped yourself."

"But my mother is very ill. I have to go to England. I had no money."

Monsieur le Directeur put a long-fingered and well-manicured hand to his chin and rubbed it gently. He glanced intelligently at Mrs. Pym. Was it not possible to overlook the indiscretion and to hush the matter up? The girl might have behaved like a fool, but obviously she had had provocation.

"Perhaps, madame—?"

Mrs. Pym understood his smoothness and would have none of it. She was fully determined to claim her pound of flesh.

"I want the police. I have been robbed and attacked. You will send for the police."

The manager regarded her with cold politeness.

"It is serious, madame."

"Of course it's serious. I'm not inclined to regard it as a joke."

The manager turned his eyes towards Elsie. She looked such a scared and bewildered creature, dumb and confused.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle, but if madame insists—"

He paused, hopefully, suggestively. If the governess would say

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she was sorry, indulge in a little helpful and humble emotion, the Brass Head might relent, but Elsie sat and stared at him like an idiot, and Mrs. Pym was brass.

She issued her instructions.

"You see, she has nothing to say. Please telephone at once, monsieur, for the police. Everything in the room shall be left as it is. I think the valet had better stay here."

The manager bowed with frigid gravity.

"Very well, madame."

IV

Even when it was suggested to Elsie that she should go to her room and wait there, she did not realize that she had ceased to be a free agent, or that her fingers were caught in the cogs of the machine. She rose, and with a kind of haggard meekness allowed herself to be shepherded into that back bedroom. The intelligent eyes of Monsieur le Directeur observed her. Yes, she was the sort of creature who might do something stupid and desperate, and the valet and the *femme de chambre* were told to remain in the room with her. The manager whispered behind a hand.

"Take care of the window."

He went off to telephone to the police, and Elsie sat on a hard bedroom chair and wished that they had left her alone. She wanted to try and think, and the faculty of thought seemed to have gone from her. She kept putting a hand to her head. She could not yet envisage the seriousness of the affair. No doubt the police would arrive and interrogate her, and she would be able to prove how disgracefully Mrs. Pym had behaved to her, and if the police were difficult to convince, the English consul would straighten out the tangle. She was not a thief. She still saw herself getting into a train

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and returning to England, with one precious day wasted. Assuredly the consul would be able to rescue her from this predicament.

She sat quite still, staring at the floor, and her stillness had its effect upon the two hotel servants. They also had a grievance against her, for when property disappears in an hotel, the staff is apt to be under suspicion, and doubtless this young lady would have attempted to put the blame elsewhere. Monsieur le Directeur was strict, and they might have found themselves dismissed at the height of the season.

The woman addressed Elsie.

"This game of yours, mademoiselle, might have been a bad one for me."

Elsie raised large, dark eyes. Her glance had a vagueness.

"I don't understand."

"If you had taken the money and got away, the trouble might have been left on our shoulders."

"But I am not a thief."

The woman shrugged.

"Is mademoiselle a little child?"

The valet, with his back to the window, lit and smoked a cigarette. He was less responsible and more sympathetic than the woman.

"Oh, mademoiselle had provocation, without doubt."

"Let her explain that to the police."

Elsie's eyes grew poignant. So, these two servants regarded her as a thief, and an enemy, she whose fault had been too much feeling. She had given herself to impulse, lost her head, and suddenly she found herself thinking of the ruined theatre at Taormina, and a man sitting on the grass. He, too, some fifteen years ago, had rushed half blindly upon his crisis. Did things happen in

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this way? You put out a hand and found it caught by the wheels of the machine.

She spoke to the valet, and her voice was almost inaudible.

"Are there police in Beaulieu?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"If they take me away—where will it be?"

"To Nice, probably."

"Then I shall be able to see the consul. You see—I must go to England to-morrow."

The pair exchanged glances over the top of Elsie's head. The innocence of the creature! England indeed, and to-morrow! The valet was sorry for her.

"Mademoiselle's mother is ill?"

"Yes, very ill."

"*Tiens*, that is bad luck. Why did you not go to the consul, m'amselle?"

"I did go. I went this morning. He is away."

The valet shrugged his shoulders. What an impasse!

There were voices in the corridor, and the voices went into Mrs. Pym's room, and presently they were heard again in the corridor. They approached Elsie's room. The valet threw the stump of a cigarette out of the window just as the door opened, and Elsie saw Monsieur le Directeur and the blue uniforms.

Things seemed to be happening without her having any control over them. She was asked questions; she supposed that she answered them. One of the *agents de police* was old, with a huge grey moustache, the other young and dark and handsome, a mere youth. There seemed to be a fog over her consciousness. She was aware of the *femme de chambre* going out, and returning with her hat. The officials were polite, grave, impersonal.

She understood that she was to put on her hat and stand up.

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The manager was saying something to the older man about the service staircase. So she was to be taken away by the back stairs. She felt cold to the knees, dumb.

They were out in the corridor, and the younger agent had her by the arm. How absurd, how unnecessary, how humiliating, but she did not resist. And then, in a flash, she saw Sally, Sally flying up the corridor with wide blue eyes and little red face aflame.

"Summer—!"

The child rushed to her and clasped her.

"What are they doing to you, Summer? Mother says—"

"They are taking me away, dear. I've got to go. I—"

With abrupt fury Sally turned upon the official world. She flung herself upon the agent who had Elsie by the arm. She struck and kicked.

"Let go, let go of Summer."

The man was a good-tempered lad and he looked amused, though Sally's shoes found his shins. But something had happened to Miss Summerhays' face. She was in tears. She bent down, clutched the child and held her close.

"Dear, we can't help it. I've got to go with them. Something has happened—and your mother—"

Seeing Elsie in tears Sally set up a sudden bellowing, and then as suddenly repressed it.

"Mother! It's always mother. She's a beast, a beast. I want to come with you, Summer."

"My dear, you can't."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



VANE left Genoa by the twelve o'clock *Luxe* on the day after Elsie's arrest, and he reached Beaulieu shortly after five. From Genoa he had wired to the Hotel Metropole to reserve him a room, and the Hotel Metropole's situation was happier than its name. Vane found the solid red building in placid possession of a garden and the sea, for the Mediterranean washed the wall of the hotel's terrace, and the sound of the sea muffled the noise of the motor traffic on the Corniche.

The Metropole, like its proprietors, was very French, all red carpet, gilding and white paint, the very style of its fauteuils suggesting the Age of Reason. Vane was offered a room on the second floor overlooking the sea, and this pleased him. It was so boring to find oneself pushed into a back bedroom at the end of a journey, and to have to issue a protest when one was feeling tired.

He rang for tea. He had tea at his window with the sunset, looking across the bay at St. Jean, and the peninsula of St. Hospice with its old round tower. It was an evening of brilliant light and of colour, in the sea and in the sky, amethyst, jade green and in

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the west opalescent flushes. A perpetual splash of water played against the rocks, and within him a pleasant restlessness prevailed. Life was coloured for him by the mystery of emotion. The painted scene was more than a mere stage.

Afterwards, he went out and wandered through the dusk, with the sky still luminous over Cap Ferrat. He strolled in search of the Hotel Splendide, and in Beaulieu the Hotel Splendide was no candle hidden under a bushel. Vane found it towering over him like a white cliff, its cornice illuminated, its windows making ladders of light. Sally's iced cake for a greedy God! The palms, the eucalyptus trees and the tall conifers were black as soot, or like the sails and tackle of ships seen against a moonlit iceberg.

Vane ventured in at one of the gates and over the rattling shingle. It was too noisy and public somehow for the feet of a lover, and he paused in the shadow of a tree and looked at the Hotel Splendide. One of those windows might be her window. But no, the *gouvernante* of Madame Pym would not occupy a room on the successful side of the hotel. Her window would be somewhere at the back, probably over the kitchen quarters where so sumptuous an hotel concealed that part of it which might be described as entrails.

But why stand there like a boy bemused beneath a window? He had not come to Beaulieu to stand under windows. Even France might suggest behaviour that was more *pratique*. Why not make sure that the Splendide did house the Pym world? and he walked across the shingle to the marble steps and entered the great doorway. He found the concierge's office on his right. He asked his question.

"Excuse me, is Mrs. Pym staying here?"

The concierge looked at him with the air of a man ready to exercise discretion.

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"Yes, monsieur, but the lady is unwell."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"No, not very serious, monsieur. Does monsieur wish to leave a card?"

"No, I'll call again to-morrow."

The publicity of the Splendide's lounge, its upholstered humanity, its vibrant chatter, scared him as it had scared Elsie. Always he would feel like a stray dog in the face of this prosperity, and expect that some minion would appear and shoo him into the street. He found himself out again in the pleasant dusk, and deciding to return to the Metropole and write a letter. He would deliver it by hand and have it sent up to Miss Summerhays' room, and his letter would efface all the complexities of this caravanserai.

"I am here in Beaulieu. If you can bring yourself to see me I shall be in the road outside the hotel gardens at three o'clock to-morrow.

"Yours devotedly,

"HENRY VANE."

Yes, just some such simple message that would echo her words to him in the letter that had followed him to Rome, for she was so like a shy, brown thrush so easily put to flight. He walked back to his hotel, wrote his letter, and returning to the Splendide was half-way across its shingle beach when he saw a child scud out down the marble steps. She came towards him over the shingle, and the flicker of her small legs reminded him of the vagaries and impetuosities of Sally.

It was Sally, a Sally in full flight, a Sally who, when hailed by the shadow man, checked herself, and then diverged to dodge possible interference.

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"Hallo, young lady."

"You let me alone."

"Don't you remember Mr. Baedeker?"

"What, Mr. Baedeker!"

She slithered towards him. He was aware of her funny little face urgent and upturned.

"Oh, Mr. Baedeker—! Something awful's happened, and they've kept me shut up—the beasts. The valet let me out, and I did a bunk. Let's hide behind that tree."

She got hold of his hand and pulled.

"They have taken Summer to Nice. I'm going to Nice."

"Who—have?"

"The police."

"The police!"

"Yes, of course you don't know. There's been an awful row. Mother said Summer was a thief, and the police came and took her. It's all lies."

Vane held fast to the child's hand. He looked across at the hotel.

"Do you mean that Miss Summerhays is in prison at Nice?"

"Yes."

"But—what happened?"

He bent over the child.

"Your mother sent for the police?"

"Yes. She said that Summer had taken money out of her bag. Mother won't tell me anything, but if Summer did take the money—she must have wanted it for something. Oh, badly. It's all beastly, beastly. And Summer blubbed. They've kept me locked in."

Vane did the unexpected. He lifted Sally and kissed her, and her little hot face pressed itself to his.

"Oh, Mr. B., she's not a thief, and if she is—I don't care. I want to go to Summer and tell her I don't care."

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He put the child down and stood bent, his hands on her shoulders.

"I'll go to Nice, Sally, and find out."

"Take me with you, Mr. B."

He was very gentle with the child.

"When did it happen, Sally?"

"Yesterday."

"You don't know why?"

"Summer had a letter. Her mother's ill. She said she had to go."

"To England?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps Summer had no money."

"Take me to Nice with you, Mr. B."

He was silent for some seconds, and Sally was conscious of his silence and his stillness. His face was dim to her in the shadow of the tree.

"Sally—I don't think I ought to take you to Nice. I'm going, but I don't suppose I shall be able to see Summer to-night. I shall have to go and see a man called the English consul. Perhaps—to-morrow—he will be able to take us to Summer. Do you understand that, dear?"

She nodded at him.

"You mean—I couldn't get to Summer, Mr. B.?"

"Yes, that's it. I want you to go back to the hotel, because I must do things quickly—for Summer's sake. You understand?"

She stared up at him.

"You'll be able to get her out of prison, Mr. B.?"

"I'm going to try."

Sally understood. The enterprise was "Mr. Baedeker's," and Sally allowed it to him because he had spoken to her as to an equal and not to a mere fool child. Yes, Mr. B was all right. He was not

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like the Allabasters and Dashwoods, bald-headed old asses who brayed at you. She put up her face to Mr. B. and accepted him as man.

"It's a secret, isn't it? I won't tell mother."

"Yes, a secret."

"I'll just sneak in and say nothing. Good-bye, Mr. B."

She nodded at him, and walked deliberately and solemnly back to the big glass doorway in the white hall. She faced about on the steps and waved to him, and Vane took off his hat to her.

II

But when the child had left him, the suggestion of her little scuddering legs setting out to hurry to Nice was both an inspiration and a challenge. He must do something at once, and he had inherited Sally's impulse to escape from this iceberg of a building and rush off to console and rescue its victim. What a devil of a mess, and how paradoxical! Elsie the offender at the feet of the irreproachable Mrs. Pym! An English governess arrested at the Hotel Splendide! Paragraphs in the papers! He was walking at a great pace in the direction of the Metropole and telling himself that he had arrived at Beaulieu twenty-four hours too late. But was he too late? Had not life pushed him on to the stage just when the play was becoming real?

Shrinking from his greater tragedy she had found herself involved in a little tragedy of her own, for it would be tragic to her, a thing of tears and of horror. A trivial affair? Yet no affair is trivial when society begins to treat you as a creature to be shut up in a box. Oh, yes, he had been through it. He had experienced that first feeling of incredulity, wonder, a kind of dazed apathy. "Has this thing happened to me?" Then the gradual or sudden realization of the four walls and the locked door. No "I will" or "I must"

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left to you. Time and space effaced, or reduced to a little, meaningless rhythm. The official hand, the official voice always in control. The horror of being shut in! What did the doctors call it? Claustrophobia. A cat clawing in a sack. Above all, an utter feeling of helplessness and finality, no "yes" or "no," the individual in you smothered, your body like one of those little balls that roll about in a puzzle-box under a glass lid.

Yes, even on that first day she would be feeling the horror of being shut up. "Oh, let me out, let me out!"

At the Hotel Metropole he found a friendly and intelligent concierge who, when Vane asked for the address of the English consul, gave it to him and asked a sensible question.

"Monsieur does not propose to go to Nice to-night?"

Yes, but that was just what Vane proposed to do, and the practical fellow assured him that he would be wasting his time. The official world must be allowed its leisure, and it was as well to exercise discretion.

"But it is very urgent."

"Monsieur, when the day's work is over no one wishes to make haste."

To prove his point he rang up the consulate at Nice and was answered by someone—probably a caretaker—who assured him that the office was closed. Monsieur le consul's private address? No, that was not his affair. The office would be open in the morning—and Nice rang off.

"You see, monsieur. You would waste your time to-night."

The man was right, and so kindly and helpfully right that Vane agreed with him. Aggressive impetuosity did not tend to conciliate the official world, and Elsie was in the hands of the official world. He went to his room, opened his shutters, and looked at the sea. Its otiose, sleepy surge went "plash, plash" against the stones; the

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lights of St. Jean twinkled. No, Nature did not hurry; she might put on assumptions of anger and haste, but the essential urge was deeper and more deliberate. Humanity was apt to froth on the surface.

But those lights like flickering eyelids. Bewilderment. Yes, that was the first thing that had made him wonder about her, that look of bewilderment. He could see her now, sitting on a stool or her bed, and staring at a wall. Bewilderment.

He changed and went down to dinner, and this leisurely meal—like the concierge—advised him against rushing off to Nice and ringing bells and finding things shut up for the night. Maturity and the chef evolved in you a social subtlety. One could hold one's menu and one's crisis in the hollow of a hand and con it like a map.

The obvious suggested itself to him while he dined.

"Go round and interview the manager of the Splendide. Try and find out the facts, or as much as the fellow will tell you. Get your dossier together. The more you know, the more use you can be in a crisis."

He examined the contents of his wallet. Two thousand or so francs in ready cash. A wad of traveller's cheques in the flap pocket under his waistcoat. Thank God for money. Where were the fools who spoke of money as dirt?

III

He walked round to the Splendide, smoking a cigar, and no longer shy of the Splendide. He was a person with a purpose. He had the confidence of his compassion.

"Monsieur le Directeur is at dinner, monsieur."

Vane was deliberate and smooth. He produced a card. He handed it over with the air of a man to whom the world granted favours.

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"I will wait in the lounge. Give my compliments to Monsieur le Directeur, and say that I shall be extremely obliged if he will see me."

He added a fifty-franc note to the card, was bowed to, and his business hastened. He was helped off with his coat. The hotel was at his service. He sat in the lounge for ten minutes, and it occurred to him to wonder what his reaction would be were he to be confronted with Mrs. Pym; but no such thing happened. A *chasseur* came to inform him that the director would see him in his private room.

Vane went. He found that polite and intelligent person in evening dress and standing behind a bureau. Vane did not procrastinate. He came to the point at once.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir. I am a friend of Miss Summerhays, yes—the governess—in Mrs. Pym's service. I have heard about this episode. I shall be grateful if you will give me the facts."

The Frenchman observed him with polite mistrust.

"Monsieur has some authority?"

"That of a friend."

"Monsieur is not a relative?"

"Not—as yet. I wish to help. Had I been in Beaulieu yesterday, this thing would not have happened."

The Frenchman sat down. Yes, obviously the gentleman was well dressed, reasonable, polite, self-assured.

"It is an unfortunate affair, monsieur. I regret it."

"I gather that Miss Summerhays was in desperate need of money. She had been called to England."

"That is how I understand it, monsieur."

"And this—lady—Mrs. Pym—?"

The Frenchman allowed himself a little grimace.

"Not a sympathetic person, monsieur. No. Monsieur under-

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stands me. He will treat—with discretion—?”

“Absolutely.”

Monsieur le Directeur nodded.

“I think—this young lady—lost her head. *Très emotionne*. Yes. It should never have happened, but mademoiselle having lost her head—and madame her temper—! *Voilà, le feu d'artifice!*”

He looked at Vane as one man of the world looks at another.

“*Malheureusement*, madame demanded the police. Mademoiselle could not deny having taken the money, or the fracas between herself and madame. I applied ice, but no, madame was vindictive and mademoiselle dumb. I telephoned for the police.”

His elbows and shoulders expressed regret, an appreciation of the inevitable.

“I gather that the *gouvernante* had had provocation, monsieur, but when a woman loses her head—! Yes, an offence had been committed, and madame was insistent. But after the arrest I telephoned to the English consul.”

“So—the consul knows?”

“Yes, monsieur. The ladies are English subjects, and I wished to be helpful. I wished to do what I could for the *gouvernante*. One has to use one’s discretion.”

Admirable word, and Vane supposed that the director of a *de luxe* hotel had to wear his discretion as he wore his trousers, nicely creased and well brushed. At all events, the Frenchman had been helpful, and his suggestion that Miss Summerhays had lost her head was a shrewd and sympathetic effort. He expressed his thanks to Monsieur le Directeur. He offered him a cigar.

The Frenchman was pleased, but he refused it.

“A thousand thanks, monsieur, but my responsibilities do not permit me to smoke. I am—for example—always on duty.”

They shook hands, Monsieur le Directeur bending slightly at

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the hips, and while remaining intelligent he could allow himself to be a little less frigid to a man.

"May I assure monsieur that I very much regret—this unfortunate affair."

"I am grateful to you for seeing me."

"Bon chance, monsieur."

He bowed Vane out of the room, and drawing himself up looked relieved over the smoothness of the interview. Men were less excitable than women, and the Hotel Splendide was so full of formidable women who chased you like a mouse for the sake of ten francs. Vane, passing out through the lounge, saw the world of the Hotel Splendide busy with its little drinks and its coffee, and preparing to play bridge. A porter brought his coat and helped him into it.

Vane tipped him.

"Good night, monsieur."

"Good night."

The big doors were opened for him. He was a gentleman with money.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



*M*ISTRAL. A north wind combing the tops of the trees and the sea with a great white ivory comb. Palms clashing, eucalyptus trees swaying and rustling. Dust blowing. The sea an intense and angry blue under that whipping wind.

The windows of Vane's taxi rattled and banged as he was driven to Nice by a bearded chauffeur in a leather coat, and as for Nice the mistral had descended upon it like some playful and monstrous ape and put its paws deep into the urban dustbin. The wind seemed to have extracted from every hole and corner all the waste paper and the dry and desiccated rubbish and sent them scudding and whirling. It had blown every rag-bag inside out in those back streets into which the *politesse* of Nice was not supposed to penetrate.

It was a demon of a day, rough-headed, agitating, filling the world with a feeling of haste and of flurry, bad for the temper, and the eyes and the skin, and for the sweet reasonableness of the impersonally minded. In one dusty, draughty space where closely-cropped plane trees defied the tempest, Vane saw a tousled copy of *Le Petit Journal* make a dash across the street and leap at the

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throat of a respectable citizen in black. It applied itself to his chest and beard, and Vane was intrigued by the gentleman's angry gesture, the disgust with which he clutched at the thing and thrust it off. For the sheet of newspaper had contained somebody's fish, and its salute was like the kiss of a Marseilles fishwife.

Vane arrived at the consulate. He paid and discharged his driver, who, as though he feared the greedy and mischievous fingers of the mistral, buttoned the notes away under his leather coat. The clerk to whom Vane addressed himself was entering up the morning's letters, for the day was still very young.

"Is the consul in?"

"No, not yet."

"When do you expect him?"

The clerk looked both at Vane and at the office clock. The clock's face was easily read, but human faces less so, and the faces of those who came to interview the consul might be more significant than their passports.

"At any moment. Have you an appointment?"

"No. I have come to see the consul about Miss Summerhays."

"Miss Summerhays? Oh, you mean the English governess who was arrested two days ago?"

"Yes."

The clerk looked with more interest at Vane. He was about to request him to sit down when a very large man with a black beard entered the office and seemed both to fill and to possess it. He was dressed in grey, and at his heels followed a little Yorkshire terrier who peered at Vane through a mop of hair.

The clerk stood up, for in the presence of Mr. Humphry Grylls the world remembered its manners.

"This gentleman has called, sir, about Miss Summerhays."

Mr. Grylls said "Ha!" and observed Vane with a pair of tranquil

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and wise blue eyes. His largeness and his beard were suggestive of Russia, but if Mr. Grylls looked like a Russian aristocrat his breed was less equivocal. His movements and his gaze had a leisureliness, while his speech was more abrupt. Not that there was any brusqueness in his voice or in his bearing; he was just courteously sudden and sagacious.

"A friend of Miss Summerhays?"

"Yes."

Mr. Grylls said: "Come into my parlour," and picking up the very small dog in his very large hands, he introduced the creature to Vane. His blue eyes had a peculiar and humorous gentleness.

"This is Tou-Tou, or the Empress Catharine. Just as autocratic. Well, you wicked little thing, say—how-do."

The dog extended a paw to Vane, and Vane shook it gently, and understood that he was going to find in Mr. Humphry Grylls an original and helpful soul, one who did not stand upon ceremony. Mr. Grylls was both the most efficient and the most absent-minded of men, a scholar, and sometimes a poet. He had been known to get into his bath at twelve o'clock, just when the luncheon gong was sounding. He would stop in the streets of Nice, and with an air of abstracted solemnity quote poetry to Tou-Tou, who, gazing up at the large and bearded creature, would emit sharp and admonishing barks when she considered that Mr. Humphry Grylls was attracting too much attention.

Mr. Grylls sat down with the dog on his knees, and Vane introduced himself.

"My name's Vane. I only heard yesterday about this affair when I arrived at Beaulieu."

Mr. Grylls, pulling the dog's ears, sat as though sunk in deep reflection. Apparently, he was not listening to Vane. His bearded face looked absent and impassive, and Vane paused, but Mr.

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Grylls had been paying attention.

"Offence against property and the person. Very disgraceful, my dear sir. Any offence against property—is so final."

"Have you seen Miss Summerhays?"

Mr. Grylls treated the question as though it trespassed upon the obvious. Of course he had seen Miss Summerhays, and the lady with the golden hair, the Pym woman. He referred with oblique antipathy to Mrs. Pym.

"May I take it that you are prepared to be a tactful person? And, before we go further, what credentials do you produce?"

"I'm—just a friend."

Mr. Grylls said "Hal" and made a grimace at Tou-Tou, and Vane, divining the original in Mr. Grylls, remained patient.

"I am ready to do anything to help."

Mr. Grylls, still addressing himself to Tou-Tou, seemed to regard that hairy little creature as the wisest person present.

"Anything to help! Tou-Tou is a practical lady. Well, let us be practical. How much do you know, Mr.—Mr. Vane?"

"I saw the manager of the Splendide."

"An intelligent mechanism in perfect trousers. Was he wearing a carnation?"

"I did not notice it."

"Did he say that the poor child had lost her head?"

"Yes, he did say that."

"And Madame le Pym has the head of a gold pin. *Absolument*, And poor Miss Tête Perdu is in prison. I will tell you the story as she told it to me."

With one big hand stroking the dog's head he gave Vane a vivid and simple account of the affair. Almost it ran into blank verse, but evidently Mr. Humphry Grylls's rendering of it had no blankness. He was involved in the affair, beard, deep voice,

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sagacious eyes, large hands. He could be as gentle to life as he was to his dog.

"So, you see— No, Tou-Tou, we will not use that word. It is unjust to little lady dogs. Madame fobs the girl off with a cheque and conceals her money. Unfortunately I was elsewhere; I had to be elsewhere. The poor kid rushes about like a bewildered hen. Everyone and everything fails her. She find herself in madame's room. She finds money. Exasperation—well—certainly. She will take what is hers in this crisis. And then—*voilà*—madame appears at the wrong moment. A scene—yes, a fracas. These affairs, my dear sir, can happen so easily."

Vane nodded at him. He knew. And watching the large hands of Mr. Grylls caressing the dog he also knew that certain social processes are, in the present state of human enlightenment, irreversible. When a lever is pulled, and levers have to be pulled, the machine is put in motion, and some particular cycle has to be completed. Mrs. Pym had put the machine in motion, and even Mr. Grylls's large hands could not arrest the process.

He said, "I understand that Miss Summerhays' mother is dangerously ill. And that—I suppose—is why—?"

He was aware of little gleams of light under Mr. Grylls's very black eyebrows.

"Yes, the human motive, utterly justifiable—perhaps. That is what makes the case—rather damnable. You see—the girl's wanting to be in England, and they have caged her out here. Meanwhile—"

"Isn't bail possible?"

"They won't grant it in a case like this. The French are so absurdly logical. The girl is guilty. In France you are always presumed to be guilty, but in her case she allows that she took the money."

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"So, she has to sit still—while her mother—?"

"Exactly. The mother seems to have no relatives and about sixpence in ready cash."

Vane sat staring at the floor as though the polished pine was a mirror in which he saw his human opportunity.

"So, she will be put up for trial."

"Yes, all the formalities. The police report to the Commissaire of Police, who will inform the Parquet. I understand that the interrogation is to-morrow."

"She will be tried at once?"

Mr. Grylls looked at him tolerantly.

"Perhaps—in three months. France is logical and leisurely."

"Three months!"

"Quite a little sentence in itself."

"And what sort of sentence will they give her, if she is convicted? Surely—the provocation, the circumstances—"

"Extenuating circumstances. But an offence against property! She is liable to five years, and more."

Vane's face seemed to sharpen to an edge.

"What! Preposterous, damnable."

"Well, perhaps two years, perhaps a year. It will depend upon the temperament of the Assize Court, and on her advocate, and on her appearance. There is the question of money for her defence.

"Oh, I'll put up that."

Mr. Grylls's eyes gave a little, approving snap.

"Excellent. I'll get hold of the best man I can find. Meanwhile—"

Vane understood him, and the immediate pathos of her crisis.

"Yes, her helplessness—in the matter of her mother. Would it be possible for me to see her?"

Mr. Grylls's large hands had been motionless for a while, but they resumed their stroking of the dog's head.

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"Oh, yes, I think so, most certainly so. The police and I are good friends. They do not refuse me—what is—reasonable. But, if I am able to produce you as a person of authority—"

A little smile showed on Vane's face.

"May I exaggerate—a little? You can suggest me as a friend who—wishes to—"

"Miss Summerhays' fiancé?"

"Yes—in a crisis. I mean—I hadn't yet put it to her."

Mr. Grylls seemed to smile in his beard.

"Let us assume—the probability. Even the French are open to sentiment—though they may label it something else. We'll go round to the prison."

He sat up in his chair and called to the clerk.

"A taxi. Ring for one."

The dog gazed at him through her mop of hair, and Mr. Grylls addressed her.

"No, Tou-Tou cannot go to prison. Tou-Tou will stay and be consul. No, no yappee-yappee. *Doucement.*"

He smiled at Vane.

"Yes, when I am out—she occupies my chair."

II

Vane's recollection of this French prison was that everything about it had been whitewashed, or as much of it as he was permitted to see, and he saw very little. Some responsible person in a dusty little bureau was extremely polite to Mr. Humphry Grylls. "*Certainement, certainement, monsieur.*" There was much verbal whitewash splashed about, but the pattern of the penal brush could not be concealed, and Vane gathered that though he would be allowed his interview with Elsie, a prison officer would be in attendance.

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He glanced questioningly at Mr. Grylls, and Mr. Grylls from the midst of a black-bearded and ducal gravity winked at him. That twitch of the eyelid seemed to suggest a gentle guile, a guile that was gilt edged and persuasive.

The room into which he was led was very small and naked, *tout pratique*, with a wooden table and three hard-bottomed chairs standing on a red-tiled floor. This room had been whitewashed, but not so recently as the corridor, and Vane noticed that the whitewash had been added to the lower half of the window, so that one could neither see in nor out. The door was a bluish grey in colour, with a clumsy brass handle, a door that symbolised a regime or a period in history.

The guardian remained by this door.

"Asseyez-vous, monsieur."

Vane eyed him tentatively. The fellow was large and red and healthy, presumably a person with a good appetite, an excellent digestion, and no ethical qualms. He looked good-tempered, and Vane's hand felt for his wallet. He sat down on one of the chairs by the table, and spoke politely to this minor official.

"Monsieur, when mademoiselle arrives would it be possible for you to wait in the corridor?"

The man smiled upon him, roundly, sagely.

"Unfortunately, monsieur, it is not permitted."

"No? Mademoiselle is my fiancée. It is very natural, is it not, that I should wish to see her alone?"

"Most natural, monsieur."

"Possibly you can exercise your—discretion."

It was a good word, and the edge of a neatly-folded hundred-franc note reinforced it. The gentleman assumed an air of slight offence, waved two flipper-like hands palms downward, assured Vane that the thing was impossible, and then accepted the note.

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"Well, to oblige monsieur. I will give monsieur five minutes."

Vane thanked him, and supposed that all men smoked cigars and were a mixture of venality, good nature and social sense. He sat and looked at the vacant chair on the other side of the table. Yes, that would be Elsie's chair. At any moment she would appear in this chilly, morose, depressing little room. What would she look like? Would she be so very different from the Elsie of Taormina, the Elsie who had run away from reality? She would return to her reality after her first two days in the social cage.

Suddenly, he was aware of the grey blue door opening like a panel in the wall. He saw two figures, a woman in uniform, a large woman with a sallow and expressionless face, and beside her Elsie in her English clothes, a somehow shrunken and thread-like Elsie. He stood up. He was aware of her eyes fixed upon him. "You!" And then he realized that she had not been told, and that she had come to this room without any knowledge of the identity of the person whom she was to see.

The door had closed on the largely sallow woman. It seemed to have opened and closed just to admit that thread-like, tenuous, voiceless Elsie. He heard himself speaking, for the room seemed too still.

"I heard yesterday. I saw Sally. I came at once."

She stood just within the door, and looked at him almost stupidly. Her face was both harrowed and expressionless, for already she was showing signs of that stupor that descends upon some of those who pass for the first time into the cage. Vane could remember just such a torpor smothering him. You sat and stared. He glanced a little impatiently at the official, who, with a surreptitious clearing of his throat behind a large red hand, arose, opened the door, and after looking up and down the corridor, removed both himself and his chair into it.

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Vane saw Elsie turn her head as though any movement or sound startled her. Her stillness might be as deceptive as the immobility of an animal that is afraid. She crouched, because flight was impossible, and this betrayal of her fear shocked him. He moved round the table, and drew back the other chair for her. It was just a gesture, made to reassure her.

"My dear, you need not explain things. I know."

Her eyes rose to his, questioningly, defensively. The pupils were large, a kind of swimming blackness. Her lips quivered.

"I did not know it was you."

Very slowly she sat down; her hands lay in her lap; she stared at the surface of the table. Even the act of sitting down was a form of self-expression and an exhausting one. She was like a bloodless thing, without substance or strength.

He understood her stupor, that horrible feeling of being other than yourself, or as though yourself had become dissociated, and he knew that, during the few moments he had purchased, all the movement and the action would be his. He had to rouse her from this stupor, bring her back to a sense of contact with kindly, human things. She needed the sweet sanity of kindness more than she would need emotional protestations, or the rhetoric of sex.

He sat down on the other side of the table. He spoke quietly and deliberately.

"Let me talk for both of us. We have been allowed five minutes alone. I came here with the consul, and he is your friend. Now I want you to realize that I have been told everything and that I understand everything. If I had been in your place I think I should have done just what you did. I should have been with you earlier, and all this would never have happened, but your letter missed me and followed me back to Rome."

She sat and looked at him like a child.

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"The money, it was the money—"

"Yes, I know. Don't let us talk about that, Elsie. It's the present that matters, and the future. I want you to let me be part of it."

Her gaze was fixed though wandering. His voice, his gentleness, his self-control seemed to sooth her. Her eyelids and lips trembled.

"I did understand, I did—really. You must have thought me such an—empty fool. But everything went wrong that day. Things do—don't they—just when you're not ready; they take you un-awares. I—I lost my head—because—it was so sudden—"

His eyes smiled at her.

"I had to tell you, hadn't I? It would have been pretty beastly—if I hadn't. But let's put that aside. I know what's torturing you at the moment."

Her stupor had passed. Her face was alive and poignant.

"It's mother. I wanted to get to her so terribly. This helplessness! Suddenly—when you can do nothing—but sit and think."

"I know."

"I can't go to her, and she may be dying. It's—so—so horrible."

Vane had produced his wallet. It contained a little notebook and a pencil, and he opened the notebook on the table.

"Give me the address."

"27, Pulteney Street. It's off the Fulham Road."

He wrote it down and she watched the movements of the pencil.

"I'll go at once, to-day."

She looked at him half questioningly, as though she had not understood him.

"You mean—you are going to England?"

"Of course. I'll do everything that can be done for your mother. I want you to leave it to me."

And suddenly she became wholly and passionately alive. She seemed to fall forward over the table, and before he had realized

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what she was doing she had grasped his hands and was kissing them.

He was profoundly moved.

"My dear, you mustn't do that! You mustn't—"

He tried to withdraw his hands, but she held them fast. She kept her face pressed against them. She was weeping.

"Don't take them away, don't—please. Oh, how different you are to what I was! I didn't understand then."

He looked at her dark, prone head, and her hair seemed all blurred. He was conscious of feeling so tender towards her, and so grateful to her for the revelation of this tenderness. He bent, and very softly kissed her hair.

"Elsie—I'm not going to harrow you, dear. I'll just do everything I can. I shall be over there, and I shall be here. Remember, you are not going to be alone. I shall come back and wait."

Her tears had wetted his hands.

"Oh, I'm so ashamed. When you wanted me—I ran away."

"There, there, there's nothing to be ashamed of, darling. This sort of thing may happen when one cares too much. Life catches one breathless."

Gently he withdrew his hands, and taking her head between them, raised it and looked into her face. The eyes were closed, the lashes wet.

"Remember, I'm in your place. I'll do everything I can. I shall come back."

She opened her eyes. She said nothing; she just looked at him, and for the moment neither of them noticed that the door had opened, and that the red-faced official was closing it and keeping his back turned.

"The five minutes, monsieur."

Vane stood up, and then suddenly sat down again, and taking

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the hands of Elsie, he smiled at her, and with their hands resting on the table they looked at each other.

"Remember, say to yourself, 'I am not alone.'"

She repeated the words, "I am not alone."

In the official bureau Vane found Mr. Grylls much at his ease, and smoking a cigarette. He glanced searchingly at Vane and saw in him a man somehow transfigured. And Vane, standing very straight and still, and looking out of the official window at a white-washed wall, uttered a few casual words.

"I'm going to England at once. Yes, just to look after things over there. I shall come back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



LOOKING at England and at a grey and February England through the window of a Pullman car Vane was surprised by a moment of tenderness. Yet, what was this England that it should move a man so deeply, and make him feel in his blood the strange beauty of things loved? Little fields, trees, hedges, farms, oast houses, cattle, an occasional church, and that familiar and sombre sky pressing so close to the landscape! This was winter, and yet his mood was full of the flowering gorse, and lambs at play, and the blackbird's exquisite and wounding notes.

A polite attendant in a white coat had paused at his table.

"Taking tea, sir?"

"Yes, please."

He was looking at a piece of parkland and a wood of beech trees, and thinking that there were certain things that money could not buy, and that he—most unexpectedly and strangely—had found this most precious of possessions thrust into his hands. Someone whom you thought of and for, that comradeship without which life is a mere flurry of phenomena. Almost, the face of this

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English landscape was the face of Elsie, not too beautiful in its obviousness, but becoming beautiful to live with.

The tea was excellent. He ate buttered toast, and remembered that in Continental hotels the toast appeared in the form of anæmic triangles, neither good bread nor toast. Beastly places—hotels, so suave and anonymous and noisy and not caring a damn for you. Great white barracks, marble floors, a chair that was never quite your chair.

He managed to squeeze out a third cup of tea. He wanted to smoke a pipe. But could one smoke a pipe in this highly upholstered coach? He glanced across the gangway and saw a big and prosperous person in the act of holding a match to the bowl of a briar. Splendid fellow! Vane filled a pipe.

A tired little man was sitting opposite him, a man who brought out papers from an attaché case and read them with spectacled attention, and it occurred to Vane that Elsie might have been occupying that chair. Poor, bewildered, lovable Elsie who had stumbled over her own seriousness into that whitewashed French prison! It was both absurd and tragic, but as the dusk came down over England he knew that the creature who was Elsie would never appear absurd to him. She was giving him back that which money could not buy; she was giving him back hope in himself.

Vane put up at the Grosvenor. He dined early and quickly, and getting the porter to call him a taxi he was driven to Pulteney Street. He had told the man to set him down at the Fulham Road end of Pulteney Street. He looked for No. 27, and found it, a high, narrow house in yellow brick with stucco embellishments over the door and windows. It was no more and no less than 27, for there were some seventy houses in Pulteney Street so exactly similar that they were like niches in an Italian *campo santo*.

No. 27's blinds were down. Vane noticed that the second floor

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windows were dark. A flight of mean and austere grey steps led to the front door. The house had a basement and as Vane climbed the steps a surreptitious cat sneaked its way up out of the area, paused to stare at him, and then disappeared through the railings.

It took him some seconds to find the bell, and as he stood waiting he thought of Elsie and her mother sitting in the Park with the autumn leaves falling. He remembered Mrs. Summerhays' stillness, her air of tired and gentle fatalism, an obscure woman to whom life had preached surrender. A light was turned on in No. 27's passage-hall, and the panel of glass above the door grew bright. The door opened.

He raised his hat.

"Mrs. Bloom?"

The woman's face seemed to hang out into the night like something attached to a stalk. Her hair was very untidy; her breath perfumed.

"Who is it?"

"I have come to see Mrs. Summerhays. I have come from abroad on behalf of her daughter."

Mrs. Bloom put a hand to her forehead. She was in a state of emotion.

"Thank the Lord—someone's come. I've bin nearly off my 'ead, I 'ave."

"How is Mrs. Summerhays?"

"How? She died this morning about ten o'clock. Yes, poor dear— And I've been off m'head, not knowing what to do."

She retreated into the passage and let Vane in, and he stood in that narrow and rather noisome hall with its oilcloth and its skeleton of a hat-stand. He felt the raw London night oozing in. He was aware of Mrs. Bloom's greasy and alcoholic face, and of her air of tousled and inflamed distress.

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"I'm very sorry. You see—her daughter couldn't come. She's—ill. My name's Vane."

He spoke to her gently, and his gentleness produced in Mrs. Bloom a sudden moistness. She became very wet about the nose and eyes, and closing the door, searched for a handkerchief, and could not find it.

"Oh, dear, sir, I 'ave 'ad a time. Her all alone, and me with no girl in the 'ouse. It's upset me—terrible—because—you know—she was the sort o' lady you couldn't 'elp gettin' fond of. And I felt all along that she wanted to die. She was down and out, poor dear."

Vane nodded. He wondered—as one wonders strangely on such occasions—whether he could present Mrs. Bloom with a handkerchief.

He said: "I only met Mrs. Summerhays once. I'm sure you have done everything you could for her. What was it—exactly?"

She sniffed and gave up searching for a handkerchief.

"Pneumonia. She was all—mazy-like—at the end. She didn't seem to know or feel.—Are you a relation, sir?"

"I'm Miss Summerhays' fiancé."

The news seemed both to console and to excite Mrs. Bloom's emotion.

"There, now, isn't that nice, isn't that a mercy! I'm just about through, sir. I feel like a bit of chewed string. My 'ead's awful."

She plucked at Vane's sleeve.

"Yes, it's a mercy you've come, sir. And the poor young lady. I'd 'ave 'ad to send a telegram, and really—it's beat me—what to put into that telegram. But you'll be taking charge, sir."

"Yes—I shall arrange everything. Don't worry."

She peered up at him.

"Would you like to see her, sir? Yes, she's nothing to frighten

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anybody. I closed her eyes myself, sir. She looks that peaceful."

He followed her up the stairs, feeling how strange it was that he should be going to look at the dead face of this woman who was Elsie's mother. He could not help noticing the downtrodden heels of Mrs. Bloom's shoes, and wondering at a fashion that ordained that even Mrs. Bloom should wear short skirts. The woman had been drinking, but Vane cast no stones. Life must be sufficiently stony in Pulteney Street without a pharisaical promoting of its petrology.

Mrs. Bloom opened a door, and hung back.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but I can't stand more corpse to-day."

What an expression! She had switched on the light and he slipped past her into the room, and became aware of all sorts of objects and impressions—a narrow white face on a pillow, the room's stuffiness, the remnants of a fire dying in the grate, a forgotten tray with a feeding-cup upon it, a slate-coloured dressing-gown hanging over the back of a chair. A pair of cheap pink bedroom slippers lay derelict under another chair. On an occasional table on the other side of the bed were medicine bottles, an orange, a watch, a couple of letters.

He felt curiously shy and self-conscious. Mrs. Bloom had closed the door, and ostensibly he was alone with Elsie's mother, a woman who was dead, but somehow he did not feel alone in the room. He moved on careful feet round the bed, with his eyes on the face of Mrs. Summerhays. He behaved as though she were sleeping. He looked at the watch and saw that it had stopped at a minute or two after half-past nine. He picked up the letters and glanced at them, and discovered Elsie in them. He put them back again on the table.

A sense of the utter loneliness of the room oppressed him. He was conscious of pity, vague fear, a realization of life's insecurity,

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the edge of the eternal shadow. He sat down on the chair with the grey dressing-gown hanging over it. He covered his eyes for a moment with his right hand, and suffered the silence of the room to sink in deep. Being modern man he had no prayer to utter. All that he could say was: "Let us be more gentle to one another."

And then it occurred to him that he was sitting where Elsie might have sat, that he was responsible for this room and all that was in it—the dead woman, her letters, her secrets, if she had any, her poor little belongings. Not only would he have to deal with the Mary Summerhays who was dead, but with the things that survived her. It was all very new to him. What did one do with a dead woman's clothes?

He glanced round the room and noticed a wardrobe and a chest of drawers. If Elsie had been here? Yes, her hands would have dealt with and tidied up this obscure tragedy.

Again he looked at the narrow white face. He asked himself a question. Was it a tragedy? Who could say? No one but the woman who lay there.

II

But even in that poor bedroom with its human debris, the remnants of a woman's contest with life, he was impressed by the purity of the face on the pillow. It occurred to him that she would never know that Elsie was in a French prison for robbing and assaulting a little amateur harlot. Also, feeling his responsibility, he opened one of the drawers of the chest, and found it meticulously neat, all its contents in order. There was a fastidiousness about the orderliness of that drawer that seemed to bring him nearer to the dead woman in the bed. Fastidiousness, a pride that refused to be perfunctory. Yes, even in this back street she had kept the remnants of her life in order.

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He opened a second drawer, and found a letter lying waiting for the person who should open the drawer:

"TO MY DAUGHTER."

He hesitated, and then realizing that it might contain details that would guide him, he opened the letter. It was very brief and simple, and quite without egotism:

"ELSIE—

"If anything should happen to me I wish to be cremated.

"I should like all my clothes to be given to Mrs. Bloom. She has been very kind to me.

"My will is in a black handbag in the bottom drawer.

"My dear—I am very tired, and believe me, it is not difficult to die.

"You have been the one creature in the world who has given me some happiness—and comfort."

Vane read no further. He slipped the sheet back into the envelope. He knew now what it was necessary for him to know, but before passing out of the room he stood at the foot of the bed and looked again at Mary Summerhays. He was moved to speak to her, though she lay dead.

"Be at peace, mother. I too have suffered. She shall not suffer on my account, I promise you."

III

He saw the doctor, a little; grey-headed, overworked man who had dealt with a delayed supper, and wished for nothing more ad-

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venturous than bed. The doctor was able to help him with regard to all the formalities. He recommended him an undertaker. Vane liked the little man who could rise patiently to the occasion and refrain from all peevishness.

"Doctor—I'm responsible for all Mrs. Summerhays' debts. I am staying at the Grosvenor Hotel. I shan't be in England long. I wish you would let me have your account."

"Oh, that's all right. The executors will deal—"

"I don't know who they are yet. I expect the daughter will be one. I would rather clear everything up—personally."

"I shall have to work out the details."

"Never mind the details. Give me a figure, and don't be too generous to us. I'm a man of some means, and I'm grateful to you."

The doctor looked relieved. With a practice such as his, and influenza in the air, the consulting of ledgers was more than business.

"Very kind of you. I'll let you know. Let me see, what name?"

"Mr. Henry Vane, the Grosvenor Hotel."

He had a second interview with Mrs. Bloom, and meanwhile Mrs. Bloom had allowed herself still more liquid comfort, and when Vane told her of Mrs. Summerhays' wish about her clothes, Mrs. Bloom grew maudlin.

"I couldn't touch 'em. I couldn't—really. I don't want a penny more than what's due."

"But it was her wish. You had been very kind to her."

"Poor dear, she never gave no trouble. I'm not a 'arpy, sir. I've never made no extras."

"Well, take the clothes, Mrs. Bloom. You can sell what you don't want. She wouldn't have minded."

"But—the daughter, sir?"

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"She'd wish what her mother wished."

Before leaving he went up again to the room and, with a kind of apologetic glance in the direction of the bed, he searched for and found the black handbag and extracted Mary Summerhays' will. It was in a long and legal envelope, and contained a letter from the firm who had acted for her, and Vane now knew to whom he could apply. He slipped envelope and document into his pocket, and escaping from some last emotionalism on the part of Mrs. Bloom, he walked back to the Grosvenor.

It was very late, but he sat down to write to Elsie:

MY DEAR,

Your mother died this morning, and quite peacefully. I gather that for the last day or two she was only semi-conscious, so that even if you had come she might not have known you.

She left a letter for you which I dared to read. Forgive me, but it was as well that I did read it, for it contained some of her last wishes. I did not read all of it. I am forwarding it with this letter of mine through Mr. Grylls.

There is a pathos in all this that is mine as well as yours. I would say to you, "Try not to feel bitter," but I do not think that there is any lasting bitterness in you. None of our violences help us to live.

I have everything in hand. I shall be with you again very soon.

Remember, no loneliness.

He went downstairs and posted the letter. He also wired to Mr. Humphry Grylls:

Mrs. Summerhays died to-day. There is a letter in the post

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to break the news. You may agree that the letter will be more gentle.

Afterwards he sat on a sofa in the hotel lounge and read Mrs. Summerhays' will. She had very little to leave—a thousand pounds or so in Government stock, and her furniture. All of it went to Elsie. He put the will back in his pocket, and lit a pipe, and remaining there like a person wholly dissociated from his surroundings, he allowed himself to dream, and his dreams were not the dreams of a young man. He accepted the things that happened, but only because mere happenings can be transcended. Haste and violence were of no use. Those fifteen years had made of him something of a quietist.

But he did dream of what might happen afterwards, and not of things as they might happen to him, but as they might happen to Elsie. Supposing society decreed that she should go to prison, how would she bear that experience, how would she emerge from it? With that same look of bewilderment, only more tragically so, and with something smirched and broken in her?

He thought: "How preposterous, how damnable! Of all the innocent creatures! The machine's so stupid; it doesn't distinguish or make exceptions. I'm not one of those who sentimentalize about the criminal; I've seen him, and most of him I'd put away painlessly and efficiently. But the machine hasn't learnt to psychologize. I suppose it's so much easier to pull a lever."

He knocked out his pipe, and sat drumming on one knee with the bowl.

"She must never feel herself alone. She must never feel herself a creature apart. The horrible self-negation that gets you in those places. Almost they suggest to you that which you are not. The cage-consciousness. And she's so sensitive, takes life so seriously.

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I'll have to keep very near to her all the time. The thing is to make her feel that she matters."

He got up, striking his pipe against the palm of a hand.

"And, my God, she does matter."

IV

In fact, when Mr. Soames put his head into Mr. Blagden's room and said: "Mr. Vane's here, sir, and wanting to see you," he could have added: "And he looks a changed man, sir." Not that Mr. Soames believed in the redemption of souls and all that sacerdotal nonsense, for Mr. Soames was a realist and a welfarist, and a disciple of the London School of Economics. He subscribed to that delightful dogma that if you happened to be a twopenny-half-penny man, no other man can possibly be worth fivepence. Mr. Soames had sat so much that he had become a professor.

But when Mr. Blagden saw Vane come into the room, he remembered that other occasion when Vane had appeared to slip through the wall like a ghost. This was a different Vane. Almost he had the air of one of those eager Victorians, a fellow with an urge or a purpose, a disciple of Browning.

"Hallo, Harry! I did not know you were back."

They shook hands, and Vane's grip was more positive, though he did not know it.

"Oh, I'm just over for a few days. I had to come over to do something for a friend."

"You're looking jolly fit."

"I am fit."

He sat down and brought out the copy of Mrs. Summerhays' will.

"I don't want to waste your time, Blaggy. You are a busy man these days, but I'd like you just to glance through this. Yes, it is a

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will, and another firm's affair, but you might tell me whether it's all in order."

He passed the document across to Mr. Blagden, who put on his horn-rimmed glasses and proceeded to read it.

"A will. Had a good time, Harry?"

"Oh, yes, I've ceased to be dissociated."

Mr. Blagden read the will, and found it—according to legal standards—simple and straightforward. He said so. He passed it back to Vane, who pocketed it, and sat looking at Mr. Blagden's inkstand.

"I will go and see the people who drew it. How are the kids, old man?"

"Oh, just kids. Come and dine with us."

"I'd like to."

There was a pause, and Mr. Blagden removed his spectacles and polished them, though they did not need polishing. He was interested in the resurrection of Henry Vane, in this air of second youthfulness, in the level and easy voice and the reinforced grip.

"Any plans, Harry?"

Vane looked at him a little shyly, and smiled.

"Yes, probably. I may settle abroad. Not quite sure yet. One gets very sick of hotels, and other people's silly noises. A *pied-à-terre*. Yes, probably."

Blagden did not ask him any unnecessary questions. When a tree put out obvious and new leaves you did not ask it why it did such a thing, or cross-examine it on the inevitableness of spring.

"What about to-night? We're free and shall be alone."

Vane made a movement of the head.

"Six months ago I should have been afraid of your wife, Blaggy. I'm not now. What time? Seven-thirty?"

"Yes. There's nothing stilted about Norah."

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"Thanks, old man. By the way—I'm staying at the Grosvenor."
Blagden smiled.

"That sounds rather—impermanent."

"It is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



ELSIE had sat for her two interrogations, firstly by an officer of the Parquet, secondly by the *juge d'instruction*, and to both of these gentlemen she had appeared calm and even apathetic. The affair was absurdly simple. There was no need to harry her, and the examinations had become mere kindly catechizings.

"Yes, I took the money, but it was owed to me. I took it in order to be able to go to my mother, who was dying. She is dead. That is all."

To her *avocat*, Monsieur Pernot, a little dark man with a black beard full of vivacious teeth, who was brought to her by Mr. Humphry Grylls, she displayed the same quiet lifelessness. She sat very still with her hands in her lap. She answered all questions with a seeming lack of interest in their significance, and without any sign of emotion.

The Frenchman was puzzled. To Mr. Grylls he said: "Is it that my client is a little *touche*, an infantile person, or is this a pose?" Mr. Grylls, who was a more intuitive creature than the Frenchman, and had dealt with life less histrionically, was able to explain Elsie's quietism.

TWO BLACK SHEEP

"She is just asleep, my dear Pernot. A kind of hypnosis: that's what I should call it. She has been like that ever since she had the news of her mother's death."

"Stupor."

"Not exactly that, not so deep as stupor. Have you ever seen a hare sitting in her tuft of grass, somehow paralysed by your presence? Don't look at her too closely and she'll continue to sit there."

Monsieur Pernot stroked his beard.

"If she were to become suddenly hysterical—in court—"

"It might make a good impression, eh?"

"Possibly—possibly."

"But she won't. Or I don't think she will. There is more to it than that."

It was raining when the Train Bleu dropped Vane at Nice, and the train was more blue than the sea. He had wired to Mr. Grylls, and that most unofficial official was waiting at the barrier, and Vane was surprised that Mr. Grylls should have taken so much trouble."

"I did not expect to see you here."

Mr. Grylls did not say that life became more interesting when you did what was not expected of you, but he got into Vane's hotel bus with him, and talked about the weather and the world's financial crisis, and the latest "woggery" on the part of Tou-Tou. He was always inventing words, especially for Tou-Tou. But as they were preparing to get out of the bus he gave Vane a piece of information.

"I think we are going to be lucky, my dear sir. She will be tried next month."

"Is that lucky?"

"You'd say so if you had been as long in France as I have."

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He remained to have tea with Vane, sitting in one of the very large arm-chairs of the lounge of the Hotel du Palais, and filling it as few men could fill it—with a presence and not with mere adiposity. A picturesque person, attracting even the eyes of the casual, and looking like Ivan the Terrible, majestic and bearded. He could frighten people when he wished to frighten them and when they needed it, a man of strange wraths and strange gentlenesses, a Muscovite bear yapped at and coerced by a little hairy dog.

The *maitre d'hôtel* of the Palais happening to come into the lounge, and seeing Mr. Grylls, crossed over and bowed to him. Everybody who was anything in Nice saluted Mr. Grylls.

"It is quite a long time since we have seen you here, monsieur."

"That is your fault, François; you make me eat too much."

"Can I do anything for monsieur?"

"This gentleman is a friend of mine, François. Take care of him, but do not overfeed him."

The tea arrived, and François having stood politely to see that everything was as it should be, bowed and toddled off on the short, stout legs of a man of property. Mr. Grylls took his tea without milk, and from somewhere slices of lemon arrived on a saucer. Mr. Grylls looked at them intently as though the yellow circles had an esoteric meaning for him.

"That's one of the problems that worries me, Vane. Did the Pharaohs of the third dynasty know of lemons? I must have had my slice of citron even in those days. Oh, by the way, I have arranged for you to see her to-morrow."

Vane passed him the toast, and Mr. Grylls refused it.

"When that stuff masquerades as toast I say: 'Fellow, thou liest in thy beard. Thou art not even a burnt offering.' *Garçon*, a slice of plum cake."

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He had his cake, and being all the time conscious of the waiting and questioning look in Vane's eyes, he ceased to address him as though Vane was Tou-Tou's elder brother.

"Yes, you'll find her quiet and serious, and sad and calm. She has taken the thing strangely well. I could have got her bail, and she refused it."

"She preferred to stay in there?"

"It may seem a curious attitude, but it has its virtues. I suppose a prison can be quiet and orderly. It lets you sit still and get your breath, and life for her has been a rather breathless business. And after all, my dear sir, this magnificent edifice is another sort of prison and an infernally noisy one. It differs only in that its clients don't realize they are in prison. Besides, I've sent her books. And what do you think she asked for?"

"What?"

"Some linen and needles and a whole assortment of coloured wools. Oh, yes, I went shopping. I bought something of every sort of colour to be had in the *Galleries Lafayette*. She's doing flower pictures in wool. That's philosophy."

One night in this Nice hotel was sufficiently restless and noisy to persuade Vane that there was something in Elsie's philosophy, and in the ordered peace of a well-conducted prison. The *Palais* was full of French people and their children, particularly unpleasant children who rode scooters in the lounge and up and down the corridors and squabbled and argued in operatic style. Vane went to bed early, but only to become involved in a tornado of banging doors and busy bells. He had someone unpacking their trunks up above, and a neighbour on his right who had a very wet cold and advertised it, and exulted in it. Into the room on his left there arrived at midnight a married pair who had been to the casino and come away from it in a state of extreme dissatisfaction with

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life and with each other. They argued it out.

Vane, having tried every sort of position in the bed and various adjustments of the pillow, got up and drew the curtains and looked at the sea. Perfectly bloody places—these hotels! He was sick to the roots of his soul of them. You were just a parasite that could do nothing but ring bells.

And suddenly he laughed. The lady next door had said something final and crushing to the man.

"You are getting fat, Alphonse. Just look at yourself in the mirror."

What a droll world! Did marriage end in your being told that you were becoming fat in heart and head and tummy? He thought of Elsie and her flower pictures in wool, and the adjectives that Mr. Grylls had applied to her. "Quiet, serious, sad, calm." What soft and gentle colours, what restfulness! For he knew that he did not want life to behave to him in the grand manner, or to confront him like the Splendides and the Majestics. He wanted a corner of his own somewhere, work under the open sky, a place where doors did not bang, and your comrade had a quiet voice and quiet eyes.

II

Next day the official world condescended and was kind. He was allowed to see Elsie in her cell, and to see her alone, and he saw her as Mr. Grylls had described her, serious, calm, and sad.

She had her work on her knees, but when the door closed she put her work aside on a little table, and rising, walked to him and just—stood. Her stillness was the stillness of shy acceptance, without fear and without guile. It seemed to ask for nothing, and yet to offer everything.

He put his hands on her shoulders, and very gently kissed her forehead.

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"My dear, it's good to see you like this. Yes, I got back last night. Everything—is finished."

He looked at her solicitously, tenderly.

"Do you want me to tell you—? No, I don't think that there is anything that will hurt. You could not have altered anything."

"Do you think she suffered? But then—of course, you could not know. I'm glad she left her clothes to the woman. I can't yet realize that I shan't see her again. I haven't thanked you yet."

"Oh, yes, you have. I'm here."

"I must owe you a lot of money."

"Not a penny."

"Oh, please—! I know you know that I'm without anything just at present. I've had to borrow from Mr. Grylls, but I know mother had a little money. You've kept an account?"

"No."

"But that's wrong of you, very wrong."

"Is it? Can't we look at it from another point of view? If you marry me—when all this is over— Yes, I haven't asked you properly, have I—but I'm not pushing my own affairs at the moment. After all, a man can choose to be responsible."

"Oh, my dear."

She returned to her chair and sitting down, picked up her work. She bent her head over it, and he had a feeling that she did not wish to be spoken to for the moment. There was no other chair in the cell, but he was ready to stand in her presence, and for as long as she wished. Her dark head was like the centre of some flower, and he waited.

She kept her eyes on her coloured wool.

"May I tell you something?"

"Yes."

"You remember that day at Taormina?—I went up to the ruins

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on the hill thinking that there was no one else in the world like you. Yes, you gave me—such a sense of security.”

She paused, and he smiled.

“And then—the idol crashed.”

“No. It was I who did not understand. But now I know that there is no one else in the world like you. I’m so—so happy.”

He stood there watching her hands at work, and for a little while there was silence between them.

Then he said: “Elsie—then everything’s quite different, and so utterly different to me. No, I can’t say much. One can’t—you know. But—I’m happy, because there’s a meaning in life. That’s all.”

She raised her head and looked at him.

“How lonely you must have been!”

“Lonely! My God, yes. But there is something else. Grylls told me that he could get you out of here till the trial. Do you know that?”

“Yes.”

“Well—?”

Her head was lowered.

“I would rather stay here. No, don’t think that— You see, I believe in things—what I mean is—I have a belief—yes—in God. I suppose we are made to believe—or born to believe, and I’m made that way—Hal. Yes, and being here is like being by yourself with all those other things—for a little while. Almost—the convent idea.”

He nodded; he understood her.

“A little secret time sacred to yourself. Yes, after months of Mrs. Pym.”

Her suddenly raised eyes thanked him.

“Yes. But how good of you to understand! You see, it is very

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quiet here. I have books and my work. There is no one to stare at me. One's so sensitive about that—sometimes. It's silly—I know. And Hal—I know that they are going to find me guilty. I may be in prison for a year. Yes, Mr. Grylls warned me, but I think I knew. I used to wonder and worry about things, the why and the how, but now I know that things just happen."

III

Perhaps Vane had never disliked bottled humanity so thoroughly as he disliked the crowd in that French Assize Court. It rained on the day of Elsie's trial, and the stuffy and badly ventilated court smelt of wet clothes, and particularly of clothes saturated with the secretions of the human body. It was a restless, chattering crowd, both vapid and brutal, out for sensation. On the list there were a number of interesting cases. They included two murders, both of them particularly unpleasant examples of *le crime passionnel*, a case of incest, two cases of rape, and other minor matters. The menu was a good one, and the court steamed and chattered and breathed garlic.

A gross person in a greasy frock-coat sat down on Vane's pocket, and heaved himself into position. He had a mouth like a red wound in a tenuous black beard. He kept clearing his throat and spitting carefully between his boots.

He addressed Vane.

"Plenty of good stuff on the market to-day."

Obviously, he was there to enjoy himself, and was provided with provisions, for Vane could feel the pressure of some tumescent bulge, a parcel. On his right hand were two girls who looked like *midinettes* taking a day off. They giggled and fidgeted and chattered and nudged each other.

Everybody talked and perspired. The place was insufferably hot,

and full of a green grey light. The windows looked dirty. There were rows and rows of faces, more faces in the well of the court, officials, the jury, the gentlemen of the law, the judge. This presiding official was a little lean man with a meagre and irritably intelligent face; he had a grey tuft of hair on his chin like a tusk; now and again he would moisten thin, dry lips with the tip of a tongue.

Into this human show-room came Elsie Summerhays, rather like a figure in pale wax, to be stared at by the crowd, appraised, discussed, gaped at. Vane understood that she would shrink from being stared at, and it seemed to him that her face was different from all the other faces. It had an essential purity; it seemed to float; it was both asleep and awake. He was aware of her eyes searching for him, and when they found him they remained fixed on him for some seconds. She smiled. She sat in a sort of pew between two sallow-faced agents, her hands in her lap, her face tranquil.

Hers was the first case, and it was a simple one. There was no sex in it, no suggestion of an orgasm, nothing to please the crowd. In this cinema show the face of the accused registered no tormented emotion. It was just a white sheet.

The man in the greasy coat heaved. He observed Elsie.

"What's this? Has she done away with the baby?"

Vane glanced at him, and remarking the man's mouth and eyes, said softly to his inward self—"You swine."

The two girls giggled.

But the procedure of a French Assize Court did not interest him as an example of the social formalities. What struck him was the noise, and the sense of animal excitement, a turgid zest in the show. The procedure might be logical—if Latin, and the formalities treated with a fine abandonment, but there was so much chatter. The business was always boiling over, and being suppressed tem-

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porarily by the icy little man in authority. Monsieur Pernot seemed to be always jumping up and gesticulating and mouthing. He scolded everybody, and was scolded. The opposing *avocat* admonished Monsieur Pernot. They wrangled with each other and with the judge. The jury listened like a number of bored and respectable persons who were being pelted with words when they were more interested in the prospect of *déjeuner*.

The public laughed and conversed. The judge called the court to order, but no one seemed to take his snappings *au grand sérieux*. The fat man beside Vane began to peel and eat an orange, and the juice ran brutally into his beard.

"*Mon Dieu*, but this is silly."

So thought the other people on the hard seats. It was a foolish affair, with no spice or sparkle, and there were better dishes to follow. The girl had pinched a thousand francs and punched her lady's head. Well, that was that. Why not finish the affair and get on to the next?

The crowd was impatient, and Vane began to suffer from an impatience of other origins. He disliked the flamboyant Monsieur Pernot, he disliked the meagre and jejune little judge. He became very restless when Mrs. Pym was being examined, a Mrs. Pym who had come all the way from Cannes with a little gigolo of a doctor man in attendance. Mrs. Pym made a very good witness; she was vindictively humane; she was performing a public service. She stood up to Monsieur Pernot with a kind of pert dignity, and gave him no advantage, though her French was somewhat sketchy. In the middle of her examination, and during one of the periodic dog-fights between Monsieur Pernot and his opponent, her doctor called for a glass of water, dissolved two aspirin tablets in it, and handed her the glass.

He, too, was a good witness, dapper, emphatic. Madame had not

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yet recovered from the shock of this outrageous assault. She was suffering from chronic headache and sleeplessness. She had a scar on her brassy head that was exactly so many centimetres in length. Yes, the accused might consider herself fortunate that her benefactress had not been more seriously injured.

The fat man laughed.

"*Tiens*, but the girl does not look as though she could swat a *mouche*!"

Vane watched Elsie's face during the examination of Mrs. Pym, and all that he saw was a flicker of gentle irony. She looked weary, tired of the heat and the faces and the wranglings of Monsieur Pernot and his advocacy. She wanted the affair over. Her expression was one of quiet and almost apathetic consent.

There were other witnesses, the valet and the *femme de chambre* from the Splendide, and even Monsieur le Directeur, intelligent and careful, and the two agents of police.

* The crowd grew more restless; it began to fidget and talk like a bored audience at a public meeting, and yet Vane gathered that the sympathy of the crowd was with Mrs. Pym. She was sexed, and she dispensed its perfume; she was a live animal; she had flavour; she could answer back. There was no fight in that rather plain and quiet young woman who sat as though she was in a church.

Vane became conscious of feeling very tired during Monsieur Pernot's oration. It was histrionic and emotional, and when Monsieur Pernot was emphasizing the extenuating circumstances, Vane got the impression that as a Frenchman Monsieur Pernot was not interested in them. A miserable thousand francs and a scuffle between two women! A silly, trivial business. So thought the public. Oh, pass it on, pass it on, and let us have something more provocative! And Vane, observing the bored faces of the jury, and

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the sharp little countenance of the judge, understood that there could only be one end to all this talk.

But when he heard the verdict and the sentence he was conscious of a shocked anger.

One year's imprisonment.

It seemed so absurd, so illogically logical, the product of the machine. He was watching Elsie. He saw one of the agents touch her arm. She rose from her chair, stood a moment, looked across at him, smiled. Then she turned to the right, passed through a door in the wall, and disappeared.

The fat man had eaten a second orange and was licking his fingers.

"Just a damp chemise, that girl!"

Vane got up to go, and in an access of disgust trod wilfully and heavily upon the fat man's foot.

IV

In the afternoon he saw Mr. Grylls and suggested that it might be possible to lodge an appeal. It was not only a preposterous sentence, but an inhuman one, and Mr. Grylls gave him one of his gently sardonic looks.

"Yes, we were rather unlucky in the judge. He's a dyspeptic. But I don't think we should gain by appealing."

"You mean that there would be very little chance of getting the sentence reduced?"

"Very little. The social world does not like interference. You see—when once the machine has ground the thing out, and you try to reverse the action—the only people who benefit are those who get paid for working the machine. Besides, you might make matters worse. Delays, arguments and all that. If I were you I would let it alone."

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"Its seems pretty monstrous."

"My dear man, everything is approximate. There are plenty of sentences that are monstrous because they are too lenient. What's more—the prison in which she will serve her sentence is cellular and solitary, but not penally so. The French are not bad in their prison regime. She might have gone to a *Maison Centrale* where she would have had to work in the prison factory."

"Does it mean that she will be in her cell all the time?"

"Oh, no. She will be allowed a visit and a letter a week. She will be allowed exercise, and to work. They run a canteen and she can buy extras. She can have books. And the cells I have seen are quite decent little places, warmed and with a good window."

Vane looked fierce.

"But it is a cell. I happen to know what— Oh, well, never mind—"

Grylls observed him very kindly.

"Try to think of her as being in a sort of convent. From what she has said to me I believe she is going to try and look at it in that way. Of course, you are going to wait and see it through."

"Yes, she can be certain of that. I want her to feel that she is not alone. That's the most horrible feeling one can have, being stuffed into a sort of pigeonhole with no one caring a damn—"

"Exactly."

Vane left Mr. Grylls, and since the sky had cleared and he was feeling restless and at war with the day's happenings, he went for a walk along the *Promenade des Anglais*. The sun was setting as he walked towards it, and the flocculent clouds were transiently flushed. Something had been happening on the *Promenade des Anglais*. There were Venetian masts and flags, and groups of people lounging, and the roadway was full of a litter of flowers, and suddenly Vane understood. Nice had been indulging in a

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Battle of Flowers. He saw the debris lying in the wet roadway, violets, mimosa, carnations, white narcissi. Some of the flowers had been pulped by the wheels.

It could not be said that he was in a sentimental mood, but it did occur to him that Elsie had been treated like one of those bunches of flowers. Yes, the white ones.

"What waste! How damned silly!"

These sophisticated people playing with bunches of flowers! And as he looked at some of the faces on the Promenade des Anglais he thought, "Well, if they have given her twelve months—most of these people should have twelve years."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



ON her first night when all the lights were out Elsie sat on the edge of her bed, and fear came to her in the darkness, some such fear as she may have suffered as a child, but where the child might have been the victim of some instinctive terror Elsie was woman. They had locked her in; she had no key; other people kept the key. The "I will"—"I can"—"I must" had gone out of her life. To-morrow was not her to-morrow, and yesterday could never be recovered. For three hundred and sixty-five days she would be a little clockwork figure responding to routine, a mouse in a cage, a creature who had not the right to say yes or no to the people who controlled her.

Control! She undressed and got into bed, and as she lay there in the darkness and the silence she had a sensation as of being held down in the bed. Other people's hands. They would not let her move. And so vivid and compelling was the suggestion that she lay cold and still, the victim of self-imposed paralysis. She could not move. Actually, for some seconds, this stupor of emotion so obsessed her that when she tried to move her legs the muscles refused to contract.

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It was a transient and a functional palsy, but it so scared her that she lay for some minutes quite still, listening to her heart beating hard and fast. She had a feeling of not being herself. She was a kind of frozen abstraction, a bloodless, will-less thing stretched out in the darkness.

The phase passed, but it left her cold and shivering. She wanted to call to somebody, to God, but when she sat up in bed and tried to pray her conscious self was as helpless as her body. She felt shut in with her fear, and some vague and elemental other self seemed to rise like a ghost and possess her consciousness. She seemed to be staring at a dark surface that had the billowy movements of a cloud of smoke. It both concealed and suggested mysterious, elemental gropings.

She found herself repeating certain words.

"I can't get out. I can't get out. No key."

Then, gradually her consciousness seemed to clear. She began to externalize her fear and to comprehend it. She understood that she had lost control of all the life that was outside four walls. Things might happen out there and she was helpless. People might come and go, remember or forget, care or cease to care. Three hundred and sixty-five days. Because—she was in love with a man, and her love seemed to be the only thing that was left to her. It transcended both her self and her sex. It was all that she was and might be, a blind and sublimated tenderness, the very essence of her serious soul.

Supposing she should cease to matter?

And from that moment fear took to itself shape and substance. It was to live with her all through those days. It would sit beside her, and walk with her and lie beside her. It would get into her fingers and her eyes. It was to produce in her a kind of self-abasement, a feeling of surrender, a shrinking from the urge to possess.

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It would make her feel plain and foolish and insignificant, one of those women who would always be left on the shelf.

How could she hold that which she loved?

What did a man ask for in a woman?

Three hundred and sixty-five days!

She would feel that during every day some part of his caring for her might fall away and drop like a fruit from a tree.

This fear made her feel rigid and inarticulate and self-accusing. She accumulated secret shames, moods of negation. No, she must not clutch, or try to influence him, whimper to him. To surprise yourself in the act of fawning upon love!

She would just sit very still, and wait.

Three hundred and sixty-five days.

II

But if Mr. Humphry Grylls could not alter the action of the machine, he could and did persuade the authorities to send Elsie to serve her sentence in a prison that was run on the lines of the Maison Correctionnelle at Fresnes.

Mr. Grylls called it "La Maison Masquée."

In this prison were confined persons whose sentences did not exceed a year. The regime was cellular and silent, and at chapel or when exercising every prisoner wore a mask. The prisoner's identity was veiled; she could not be stared at or recognized; the penance was her own penance, to be suffered in secret.

La Maison Masquée had its own canteen. Two meals were provided, but the prisoner could supplement the meals from the canteen. She could buy clothing, or order in an extra dish. She was expected to keep her cell clean and in order. She could claim a visit every week, and write and dispatch two letters. Work and material were provided for her, and as a seamstress or a mender

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of old clothes, or as a worker in lace or embroidery, she was paid for the product.

Elsie's cell was a large one, and it had a window that could be opened, and one of her first impressions was one of surprise and pleasure at this window. She opened it and shut it several times during the first quarter of an hour, as though the opening of the window symbolized hope. She could look out and see a kind of courtyard and a white wall, and in the distance a little green hill capped with trees. She wondered about the trees—were they elms or poplars?

The walls of the cell were white, the floor of red and polished tiles. She was expected to polish those tiles. She had a folding bed with a mattress, sheets and blankets and a pillow, a table, a chair, a plain chest of drawers. Water was laid on, and the cell electrically lighted.

She remembered the way that the heels of her shoes clattered on the tiles, and the voice of the wardress speaking to her.

"Have you any slippers?"

No; how could she be expected to possess such articles when nearly all her luggage had been left to be stored at the English Consulate?

"No, madame."

"You can buy slippers at the canteen."

What a comforting suggestion! Slippers! And somehow she felt strangely consoled. Moreover, the wardress had a pleasant voice.

"I have some money, madame. Can I use it?"

"Of course. There are certain hours when you can visit the canteen."

The woman had left the regulation garments on the bed, and also a pair of sabots, and Elsie sat down on the chair, and took a letter out of her pocket. The envelope contained a sheet of paper

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with the address of the Hotel du Palais on it, and also two five-hundred-franc notes.

She reread that letter, and as she read it her particular and secret fear sat beside her and asked her the inevitable question: "Will he always write to me like this?"

She was not to be offended at his sending her money! As if it would offend her! She had no illusions as to the blessings of poverty, and he was very careful to explain that he was acting as her banker until such a time as her London lawyers should have completed the necessary formalities and handed over her mother's estate. He said that Mr. Grylls had told him that in the *Maison Masquée* she could buy additional food, little luxuries, clothes, and he wanted her to have everything that was possible. Gently he insisted upon it, and she loved this insistence. She was one of those women who grow tendrils, even though she might be self-consciously afraid of letting those tendrils cling.

This letter of his had a refreshing naturalness. It gossiped, and was intimate, and made her feel that they were out rambling together like a boy and girl, full of the chatter of mutual confessions.

I do hate these damned hotels. Do you remember the Italian lady at the Elyseo, who used to break into song? I think I must have the world's pet imbecile in the room overhead; she dithers about for hours on squeaking shoes. Yes, it's a she. I don't think you will want to go back to hotels!

This whimsical note in him was new to her, and it seemed to express a tenderness that was workaday and consoling. He wrote to her more as a comrade than as a lover, and the human detail in his letter somehow gave her a feeling of being in a corner of the world with him where work was to be done. They were chattering

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together over some mutual job, and he had his pipe in his mouth, and she—

Oh, yes, if life would let her do things for him!

She folded up the letter and the bank-notes, and put them on the little wooden table with a glass—yes, it was her tooth-glass—to keep them in place. The wardress had told her to make her bed, and to put her small possessions away, and to change into the official clothes. Her mask was laid out with her clothes, and she picked it up and examined it. Would she have to wear this thing when he came to see her, or perhaps she would be allowed to take it off? And yet her secret self would be wearing a mask, and through the eyelet-holes she would be watching his face and eyes for any dimming of the sacred fire.

III

Next day she had her first experience of *Maison Masquée's* routine. The prison rose early. It made its beds, and cleaned and polished both cell and person, and breakfasted on coffee and bread. Doors were unlocked, cells and prisoners inspected, masks put on while the chapel bell rang for service. Elsie found herself joining the stream of other masked figures in the white corridor and flowing with them into the chapel. No one spoke. There was silence save for a vague rustling, the clattering of sabots or shoes, and in the chapel she sat and listened to the priest's voice. She was conscious of all these masked figures breathing. The woman who sat next to her on the left never made a movement during the service, but sat with her head hanging down, and two large work-coarsened hands prone on her knees, but just before the final words Elsie was conscious of being touched, and, turning her head, found herself looking into two eyes.

They were tragic eyes. They seemed to ask for something in the

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silence. They expressed in their curious stare a kind of hunger; they craved a moment of self-expression—the right to touch and to be touched. And Elsie smiled at the eyes of the woman next to her, and since the only smile that is human and convincing shows in the eyes, the woman drank of that which Elsie could give.

Her rough hands moved in her lap. She murmured a word.

"Merci."

Into her cell they brought a bundle of the blue linen that is worn by the French workman in the form of trousers, and when she unfolded the stuff she found that the material had already been cut to pattern. There were needles and thread, and it was explained to her that all she had to do was to lay out the various pieces like a puzzle and sew them together. Could she do it? She thought so! But what about scissors? The wardress hesitated for a moment, and then confessed that the prison was short of scissors, and that she would have to bite the thread.

Elsie was puzzled, and then she understood. She was on probation. Was it that scissors were only allowed to those prisoners who could be trusted—but if so, what about the knife she would expect to use at dinner-time? For instance, did they allow that woman with the tragic eyes a knife, or did she have to use fingers and teeth? She spread her work on the table, and sat down facing the window; it was a south window and the sun was shining. The blue linen looked quite gay in the white cell, and she could remember seeing Sicilian peasants at Taormina wearing just such a colour among the lemon groves. The sky was blue, but not so deeply blue as the linen. She worked steadily and with a pleasant tranquillity, thinking of other things.

Later the prison bell rang again. Exercise. She found herself in the corridor with the other women and girls, and they trooped out into a big yard surrounded by white walls. The file of masked

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figures formed itself into a ring and proceeded to revolve with a space of about six feet between each two figures. The woman in front of Elsie was stocky and heavy; she bulged at the hips, and the ankles above the sabots were like billets of wood. Elsie had trouble with her sabots; every now and then one would turn over and pinch her instep; they hurt her feet, and she had to concentrate all her attention upon keeping upon good terms with those wooden shoes.

But she was to become accustomed to her sabots. Almost they would become as familiar and homely as her slippers.

More sewing of blue linen. Occasionally she would get up and look at the trees on the little green hill. She was to see them in spring and summer and autumn, and already there seemed to be a faint powdering of green on them. Three hundred and sixty-five days, a year of her life, just because she was a thing of emotion and had lost her head.

And now she had lost her heart!

Dinner and more sewing, and no interval for tea. How she missed that mild little meal, and the association of Sally and her "googy" cakes. She thought much of Sally, and the heritage of Sally, and what the world would make of Sally. Poor little kid! Would she become just another Mrs. Pym?

Later came the canteen hour. She found herself with other women at what appeared to be a kind of general store or village shop, but a strange shop because of its silence. She noticed that there were only two wardresses in attendance, and she gathered that the supervision was less penal than it appeared. Or was it that under these conditions of work and rhythm and silence the souls of these women absorbed an inward self-restraint? It was retreat, meditation, a pause between periods of stress and excitement. You sat quietly with your own thoughts; you arranged your memories

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and reflected upon them. And perhaps some of these women were glad of the rest and the orderliness away from men, away from children. To the tired and the overwrought it might be a time of tranquillity.

She had brought one of Vane's five-hundred-franc notes with her. She bought jam, chocolate, a tin of sardines, a pair of slippers, note-paper, a pen and ink. She went back to her cell with her purchases, and understood that the rest of the day was hers.

She would write a letter. She was to be allowed to send two letters a week. Yes, she would write a portion of a letter each day—make of it a kind of diary. But how was she to get the cork out of the ink-bottle, for it was sealed over with red wax? The problem posed her for a while, and then she sacrificed one of the three nibs she had bought, and after some fumbblings she managed to prise out the cork.

She sat down to write. How should she begin?

She wanted to write "Beloved," but instead of it she began her letter with "Dear Hal."

IV

On the next day she had a letter from him. She kept it as something precious until the evening, and then she found that he had filched that beautiful word from her, or had had more courage to use it:

"Beloved—"

She was conscious of a thrill. She sat motionless with her eyes closed, letting that word sink deeply in. Why hadn't she used it to him? Was she still afraid of reality, the terrible reality of caring too much? Three hundred and sixty-five days. So many things could happen in a year.

She read his letter. It was a long letter, and it was a kind of con-

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fessional, and when he told her intimate things about himself he explained that he wanted her to realize that he understood. He described to her his own first year in prison, painting in the moods and the emotional impressions as though showing her how one might be wounded and how one could avoid those wounds. He said:

I came to understand that there was solace in surrender. I had broken the social compact, and society had a right to its retribution. I did not look on my sentence as an act of revenge upon the part of society, though I myself had indulged in revenge. I had taken away life. It was right that society should compel me to give up so many years of my life.

Sometimes circumstances or a concatenation of circumstances are too strong for us. We are caught in a moment of weakness or of overmastering emotion, and we are whirled over the edge of things. Sometimes it is the very force of feeling that hurries us along. I spoke to many men in prison, and very few of them had planned to do the thing that they had done. Often the very crime was a passionate attempt to right some other selfishness or foolishness. Very few men are fraudulent for the sake of the mere cash. Life and our own vanity may involve us. We may strike or do things in a panic. We stam-pede like frightened animals.

To you, my dearest, none of this applies. You lost your head for the sake of your heart.

I want to say things to you, because to a sensitive nature society's condemnation is always a shock. One feels like a child put in a corner. One is in disgrace, and it may seem a dreadful disgrace. One broods, one sits and stares.

Outcast. The feeling that things can never be the same. All

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one's thoughts are turned inward. Introspection, a dreadful feeling of loneliness, of being different, inferior. One may have moments of terror, moments when one feels shut up in a box. Sudden rages, or even worse—those days of dreadful apathy. You wish to die. You hate yourself. You feel tarnished. Torpor. Nothing matters.

My dearest, I went through it all. I am not telling you this in order to exhibit myself. I only want to warn you against some of the illusions, for to you they would be illusions. I do not want you to suffer, because in a prison one can create one's own sufferings. And because I love you. Because my life seems to have been re-created through you. Is that a little thing to say? Think, be proud.

Again—try and put on the routine like a dress. It is you and not you. Try and live in that inner world, the world that is ours and will be more ours.

I want you to think of what you would wish our life to be, where you would wish to live it.

Shall it be down here in the sun?

I tell you—I want to work. I feel that I want to get down into the very earth. This drifting, parasitic, day-to-day slouch disgusts me. Hotels, hotels, anonymous—noisy places.

I want to take off my coat and live.

So think, my dearest, think. I have a feeling that you could be content with simple things. Shall we have a corner of our own somewhere here?

Would you be homesick for England?—Yes, I have been dreadfully homesick sometimes, but that can be cured. We could cure each other of that.

But, my dearest, no feeling of self-negation, no feeling of having sinned against things.

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Next week I shall see you. Every week I shall see you. Fifty-two times. That's wonderful.

v

She realized that all through her life she had been seeing people rather dimly, like men and women serving in a shop, but on the day when visitors attended at the "Maison Masquée" and she saw Vane, he was like a picture with the sun upon it, and the colours were alive—the blue of the iris, the brown texture of the skin, the grey flecking of his very dark hair.

The grille was used no longer in this prison. Prisoners and visitors assembled in a room with whitewashed walls; there were long tables and benches, and the women sat on one side of the tables and the visitors on the other. Two officials were in attendance.

It was impossible to be apart or not to be overheard, and yet the publicity of the occasion did not seem to trouble most of the occupants. Men had brought children, and in the crowd the individual self-consciousness seemed to melt and lose itself in childish chatter.

Elsie and Vane sat opposite each other at the end of one of the wooden tables. His hands and forearms rested on the table. He seemed to smile at her all the time. He looked younger, so brown and well.

She sat and gazed at him.

"Aren't you going to let me see you?"

She realized that there had been a subconscious motive behind the forgetting to raise the mask. It had given her a feeling of being able to look at him while remaining veiled. Suspense, that secret fear! She had watched his eyes.

"How silly of me!"

She removed the thing. Her face was quick with colour, her

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eyes darkly confused and full of tremors of light. He just sat and looked at her with a kind of little secret smile.

"I've brought you some books."

She seemed to have nothing to say to him—nothing at all. Her consciousness was like broken water played upon by sunlight. She was a confusion of feelings and impressions, and nothing articulate would emerge.

He put a hand across as though he felt that she needed some object to grasp.

"That's all right. I had all sorts of things to say—and I've forgotten half of them. You are looking so . . ."

He could not find the right word, for no word was adequate.

"Yes; so had I. Isn't it absurd? I always do lose my head."

Almost he laughed. He was holding her hand across the table, and he was holding it very firmly as though he never meant to let it go. She saw him turn his head and glance at the couple next to them, and his blue eyes seemed to collect little wrinkles of kindness. Something had both touched and amused him. She too turned her head and looked, and saw an old, rock-headed peasant holding the hands of an old woman who looked as much part of the soil as he was; both of them were weeping quietly and neither could utter a word.

Their glances joined again, and she seemed to see right down into the reality of him. Her comprehension of him as man seemed to sink deeply and yet more deeply into a profundity of tranquil silence. She saw his lips move.

"Not a bad way—that—either. Words don't go deep enough sometimes, do they?"

She nodded.

CHAPTER THIRTY



VANE's flight from the glare and the noise and the dustiness of Nice was hastened by a young Franco-American couple who came to inhabit a room next to him. With a blowing of trumpets and a banging of doors they arrived in this room at any time after midnight, and were either alcoholically amorous or correspondingly quarrelsome. They "rowed" at the tops of their voices, the girl in a shrill drawl, the young man in one of those deep French voices that suggest enlarged tonsils and a gargle. On the third night Vane got up and knocked at the communicating door.

"May I suggest that some of us want to sleep?"

The girl threw her shoe at the door, and laughed.

"Some old guy in there's got wakeful in his stomach."

Vane went to see Mr. Grylls, for Mr. Grylls knew all that Mediterranean coast from Spezia to Marseilles, and Mr. Grylls, holding Tou-Tou in his lap, listened to Vane and to Vane's description of hotels as places where you just rang a bell and bribed people, and ate unlimited veal and listened to other people's silly noises. He understood Vane to say that he thought of settling in the south and of buying a small property somewhere where the

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sophistications of life did not lie like a dog on your doorstep. He wanted quiet; he wanted work; he wanted to take off his coat and get busy.

Mr. Grylls tickled Tou-Tou's hairy head.

"The gentleman's a pragmatist, you little hairy thing. Peace, propriety and property. What do you want to do, my dear sir? Live among your own vines and olives?"

"Well, that's rather the idea."

"Father Adam. Why not go and look at Vence. Quite an Anglo-American colony at Vence."

Vane demurred.

"I don't want to be—"

"Ha! too Nordic! Too potentially social! Quite so. Well, explore Provence. There's a fascinating bit of coast between St. Raphael and Toulon. Pack a bag and explore Canaan."

Mr. Grylls's eyes twinkled.

"Tou-Tou, my dear, you and I would have preferred Canaan before Jehovah cornered it. Tiresome old gentleman—Jehovah. What, you don't believe in Jehovah, you wicked little thing! A bit unheavened, wasn't He? Pack a bag, my lad, and explore."

Vane thanked him.

"I suppose I could get my heavy luggage stored?"

"Send it here. I keep an attic. And don't do anything without sending me a line."

"Why should I trouble you?"

"Yes, why the devil should you? But do it, all the same."

Almost afloat upon one of those blue crescents in that rocky coast Vane discovered St. Trophime. Mr. Grylls had marked for him one or two places on a map, and St. Trophime was Vane's first experiment. He descended upon it with a suit-case, and traversing a street that was transformed in summer into a leafy

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arcade by an avenue of pollarded plane trees, he arrived at the Hotel des Palmiers. The Hotel des Palmiers was in possession of six palms, a garden that consisted mainly of shingle and beds of marigold, a number of round iron tables painted blue, and an atmosphere of preternatural peace. A world's crisis was confounding the economists, and even St. Trophime was feeling the suck of the depression. The Hotel des Palmiers cherished exactly three clients, and one of them was leaving.

The Hotel des Palmiers welcomed Vane. It met him in the person of a rotund little madam with a moustache and a neck that was unable to decide whether it was alpha or omega. Madame's bosom was like a gently swelling hill.

Had she a room? *Mais oui*. And was monsieur's heavy luggage at the station? He explained the solitary suit-case by saying that he had come to look at St. Trophime. He wanted quiet and a room on the top floor.

Madame was not a quietist; she liked her hotel full and as alive and sizzling as a mixed grill, and transient gentlemen with suit-cases were not all that she dreamed of, but she had to make the best of Vane and of a bad season. She showed him upstairs, and was a little puzzled by the thoroughness with which he explored her top floor. Could he have a room at the end of the corridor, yes, looking south? Why, certainly. She showed him the room, and observing the inevitable grey door that communicated with the adjoining chamber, he asked if the second room could be his.

"Monsieur wishes for two rooms?"

"Yes."

"For a friend?"

"No. I should like to use the second room as a sitting-room. What would the charge be?"

She named a sum that was ten francs more than she expected

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to receive, but Vane did not boggle at the price. With that second room in his possession he would be somewhat entrenched against adventitious and human noises, domestic differences and endearments, gossipings, ablutions, dental hygiene, sonorous people who snored. A genial gnome in carpet slippers and an apron carried up his suit-case, and Vane unpacked.

His first explorings of St. Trophime were not too encouraging. He went east when he should have gone west; he circled round the sanctuary of the saint when he should have set his face towards St. Trophime's new and minute casino. He found himself involved in a maze of rather noisome little alleys; he discovered what appeared to be the saint's dump for all his discarded tins and bottles and domestic débris and dead dogs. Almost he held his nose in this odour of sanctity. Was this Mr. Grylls's idea of the picturesque and of the perfumes of Provence? If so—! He retreated.

But the new town waited for him like a woman who had shed too much frowsy skirt and petticoat. It cultivated the New Nakedness, and especially so in summer. It had a little harbour where the water crinkled under the flanks of blue, white and green boats. It had a *plage*, and green seats, and palm trees, and a wonderful assortment of mongrel dogs, a casino, a Café de Paris, a row of shops, garages, an English tea-shop, an agency. *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* were exposed for sale outside the local stationer's. An innocent blue sea, limpid and languorous, made baby prattle along the curving sands. Gaudy little new villas sat on the hill-side above the town and sunned themselves among the pinewoods, and their painted and exotic faces advertised the dominance of things feminine.

The St. Trophime of the new dispensation was a catholic and tolerant saint. The little town had a sunny face, and an air of cheerfulness, and even the dogs who forgathered on the *plage* and

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scratched themselves and ran around after interesting odours, were obvious and happy extroverts. St. Trophime could lounge at its leisure. It had its "originals" who wore all sorts of funny clothes, and who—in summer—wore as little as it was possible to wear. There were children, women sitting upon seats and knitting, other and occasional women who sat on seats a little differently, and spun webs. The dawns and the sunsets were exquisite. Even when the mistral blew and the palms on the *plage* were like tortured heads of hair, the sea was like the tail of a peacock.

Vane, wandering up one of the hill-tracks, sat down in the shade of an umbrella pine, and looked at the blue bay, and the red-brown roofs and white walls of the little town. It pleased him and yet not completely so. It seemed to lack shade and secrecy. It would be so full of glare in the height of summer, and he was northern man, not Greek. If there existed any little shady, green pocket on the edge of all this brilliancy—well—that was the sort of pocket he would wish to slip into. He did not want to live in a villa that was all lip-stick and face powder. Nor was Elsie that sort of woman.

II

Next day he discovered Le Paradis.

He had wandered up one of the lanes branching from the high road by the sea, and quite suddenly he came upon this funny, shabby old place half hidden among trees. He was confronted by a stone wall, and rusty iron gates to which a notice-board was attached.

"A Vendre: S'Adresse au L'Agence Smith. St. Trophime."

The gates were padlocked and chained, and from them an avenue of cypresses led up to the open ground below the house, for its trees had been planted in the shape of a crescent to clasp and shelter it, and yet leave it in the full sunlight. Vane, feeling adven-

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turous and solitary, scrambled over the wall. He came at once upon a mass of bearded iris in full flower, and the display was so beautiful and so unexpected that he stood and stared. He walked up the avenue of cypresses, and the half concealed house seemed to wait for him, for it was set so perfectly among its trees that only portions of it could be seen, and the whole was a charming conjecture. Long and low in proportion to its length, with a brown pantiled roof projecting to cast a band of shadow, its walls were softly white, the shutters a faded green. It had a funny little belfry with a green bell, and low chimneys capped with tiles. A terrace and balustrade added to the breadth and the composure of its setting.

As for the trees they were both evergreen and deciduous, cypresses, a big stone pine, planes, acacias, two or three Lombardy poplars, and in the spring of this southern year all the diverse and delicate greens made the cypresses look quite black. Something flamed, three old peach trees in blossom. Behind the house the pine-woods and the hills built a perfect background. Between the trees and below the terrace a stretch of grass dipped gently, and it was powdered with flowers like the foreground in some old Italian picture. Approaching the terrace Vane found that it had a loggia east and west, two shady spaces hung with roses, glycine, vines. A flight of steps led up to the terrace, and upon these steps he stood and gazed.

He thought: "What is the snag here? It's a fool's paradise, but where is the fool?"

He looked at the house. It was old and shabby, but the patina of its age was perfect. The closed jalousies needed painting, but with discretion. The door was almost grey from lack of paint. The terrace was weedy, the climbing growth all tangled. He felt a kind of stirring of his vitals as he walked along the terrace and round

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to the back of this deserted and most silent house. He found a small courtyard shaded by pollarded planes, its stones mapped out in grass. There were old out-buildings, a large water-tank, a queer little round tower capped with a conical roof of tiles that looked like a dovecot. Farther still he found an orchard and a vineyard, the vines arow in the warm red soil.

He returned to the terrace. The view from it was perfect, a wedge of blue sea, the mountainous coast across the bay a greyish violet, the campanile of St. Trophime's church, a few brown roofs pleasantly near yet sufficiently and exquisitely far. And again he said to himself: "A fool's paradise. Where is the snag?"

Reclimbing the wall and returning to St. Trophime he searched for and found the Agence Smith. Smith, indeed—the absolute and the universal! Who and what was Smith?

He entered and found himself facing an enclosed *caisse* and a counter. Through an arched doorway on the left he saw a man in a brown suit seated at a desk. The man was smoking a pipe, and his grey hair fitted him like a cap. He turned his head and his eyes met Vane's.

He said in English: "Good morning! My clerk is out for the moment. Anything *I* can do for you?"

Vane removed his hat and walked into the inner room.

"Good morning! Yes. I've been looking at a funny old place up the valley. Your board is on the gate. Yes, a place with a lot of trees."

The Englishman held his pipe in his left hand and stared with very blue eyes at Vane. His face had a kind of pleasant dustiness as though years of St. Trophime had bleached him and then powdered him as a dry road powders a hedgerow.

"Oh, you mean Le Paradis."

"Is that its name?"

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"Yes."

"Rather curious. There is something about it that suggests fool. You'll excuse me."

The man at the desk was all blue-eyed gravity.

"I don't quite get you. Sit down."

Vane sat down. He liked the look of the other fellow.

"Are you Mr. Smith?"

"I am."

"That place is for sale?"

"As you see."

"Well, would you mind telling me what the snag is?"

Mr. Smith stared at him, and then he sat back and laughed, and his laughter was like his face; it had a muffled dustiness.

"Snag? Well, nothing actual. It's an old place."

"Out of repair?"

"Only superficially so. Water and electric light. Sanitation all right. It's just an old place."

"Do you mean that that is the only objection?"

Mr. Smith looked whimsically at Vane.

"How long have you been here?"

"I came yesterday. The consul at Nice suggested I should come and look round here."

"Oh, Grylls. Yes, a bit of an original, isn't he, but the best man on the whole coast. Well, haven't you cast an eye over some of our new villas?"

Vane smiled.

"Well, to be perfectly frank, it is the new villas that cast eyes."

"Exactly. You see, we like things gaudy and new arty down here, with plenty of colour, bright yellow distemper and Reckitts' blue paint, or green and crushed strawberry. I have sent quite a dozen people to look at Le Paradis. It's an old property that only

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came into the market this winter."

"None of them liked it?"

"No."

"What's the price?"

"They are asking five hundred thousand francs."

"Let's see—"

"About four thousand pounds."

"How much land?"

"In hectares. I'll give it you in acres. About twelve."

"That includes orchard and vineyard and wood."

"Yes. You seem to have been over the place."

"I'm afraid I scrambled over the wall. I should like to have a look at the house."

"I'll give you the keys. Care for me to come with you?"

"No, don't bother."

"Oh, by the way, there's no central heating. That's about the only snag I know of. Yes, that's a considerable item, but it's a delightful property."

Vane put the keys in his pocket and returned to Le Paradis. He judged it to be about half a mile from St. Trophime, not too far and not too near. It pleased him even more the second time, but as he tried a key in the lock of the faded door he chastened himself with a little dose of scepticism. Yes, there would be some snag, damp, gloom, defective drains. He found himself in a little hall with three doors opening from it, one to the left, one to the right, and one facing him. They were painted a dove grey, and the walls reminded him of Pompeii with their flowered panels and scrolled cornices.

He tried the room on the right, opening all the windows and shutters. It had three windows opening on to the terrace, one of them french, and when the light flooded in he knew that he liked

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the room. It was beautifully proportioned, its colouring a soft amber, with the woodwork silver grey. The floor was of pine, the fire-place plain white marble. Probably it had been used as a *salon*.

He explored the room on the other side of the hall, and found it equally pleasant, one of those tranquil, unworried rooms. The outlook from the windows was perfect. There were four good-sized bedrooms above, but when he came to the sort of cell that had seen service as a bath-room he closed the door again decisively. That part of Le Paradis was certainly antique, nay, prehistoric.

Well, the kitchen quarters! He had conceived a sudden mistrust of Le Paradis' plumbing, and he went downstairs to know the worst. He expected something squalid and dim and greasy, and, to his surprise, he found white tiles and a large window, clean walls, a sink that appeared not to have known iniquity. He was surprised, relieved. He stood and reflected.

Le Paradis needed presenting with the order of the bath. It needed radiators, and probably it would require some of those appurtenances that one associated with the name of Doulton. But, after all—!

He went out and strolled up and down the terrace. He plucked a rose and smelt it, and put it in his buttonhole. He felt a sudden excitement in the urge to possess this tranquil, pleasant place, with its secrecy and its spaciousness.

It had a vineyard! Somehow he knew that he had always lusted to possess a vineyard.

III

* Vane returned to Mr. Smith and the Agence. He supposed that a good business man would make an offer for Le Paradis, quoting a figure well below the sum asked, but neither Elsie nor Vane

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would ever be good business people or able to play the skin-game.

Vane said to Mr. Smith: "Look here, I like the place, but the bath-room's impossible, and I suppose it would cost me quite a lot of money to put in central heating. I think they ought to knock something off the price."

Mr. Smith's blue eyes narrowed slightly. He, too, happened to be a sensitive, but life had compelled him to grow a thicker skin.

"No, I don't think I could advise them to do that. I'm not bluffing you. Do you know how much they are asking for land at St. Pierre les Pins?"

Vane did not know, and Mr. Smith told him.

"A hundred francs a square metre near the sea, and at the rate of a thousand pounds an acre on the hills. Go and ask them."

"I'll take your word for it."

"And at Le Paradis you would be getting twelve acres, and a charming old house in a perfect setting."

Vane nodded.

"I agree. But I suppose you wouldn't object to my sending a surveyor over?"

"Of course not."

"And you would hold the place—say—for a week?"

"Yes. But if any other offer happened to come along—I have to think of my clients."

"I quite understand that. I'll ask Grylls to recommend me a surveyor. You agree?"

"Certainly."

Thereupon Mr. Smith suggested little drinks, and he took Vane to St. Trophime's Café de Paris, a white house with bright blue shutters and bright blue tables arrayed under sheltering plane trees. They sat in cane chairs that had been painted a gaudy yellow and watched St. Trophime and its dogs, lounging and sunning it-

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self on the sea-front. The sea was all flickers of light, and the sky as blue as the tables.

They gossiped, and Vane asked questions.

"Pretty hot here in the summer, I suppose?"

"Oh, not too bad. You get used to it. You'd find *Le Paradis* cooler than most places. It was built by people who belonged. Oh, yes, we're quite gay; we have a bathing season. I get away for a month in October."

"What about taxation?"

"Oh, not too bad. Got your money in England?"

"Yes."

"Well, you would save on income tax. They cut your throat in poor old England. Married?"

Vane smiled over his little glass of cinzano.

"I'm going to be."

And then he asked Mr. Smith about the vineyard. Did it really produce grapes, and was it possible to make wine?

"Wine? Some of the best red wine on the coast. By the way, I forgot to tell you, *Le Paradis* has its own plant, yes, in one of the buildings at the back."

"We could make our own wine?"

"Yes."

Vane held his glass up to the light.

"Makes you feel you are back in Greece—somehow. No, I'm an abstemious sort of fellow, but it's the colour—the perfume, the idea of the thing."

Mr. Smith said, "Just so."

IV

Vane dispatched a very lengthy reply-paid telegram to Mr. Grylla.

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Considering place—St. Trophime. Could you recommend surveyor and persuade him report at once? My address, Hotel des Palmiers. Agents are "Agence Smith." Matter rather urgent. Apologize troubling you, but grateful for any help.

VANE.

Mr. Grylls's answering wire arrived during the afternoon.

Sending surveyor to-morrow. Know Agence Smith. A blue-eyed firm. Gratitude out of date.

GRYLLS.

After tea at the Hotel des Palmiers, and a *thé complet* that was completely toast, Vane put the keys in his pocket and took the road to Le Paradis. He had seen it in the morning light, and he wanted to see the place with the late afternoon sun upon it, and to poke his nose into every possible corner. He shut the iron gates behind him and padlocked them, and stood and looked at that patch of purple iris and the shadowed way between the cypresses, and the white façade of the house. The place charmed him. It was not like one of those coruscating villas; it was real; it belonged.

He thought, "One would have to keep a small car."

But was it possible to get a car into the precincts of Le Paradis? The place must have some other entrance, and going in search of it he found a second gate higher up the lane, and a rough track leading to the outbuildings and the courtyard. So that problem was effaced, and he walked up to the orchard and the vineyard. The orchard was in flower, a white and flocculent mass with an occasional peach or apricot adding a splash of colour. He went and looked at the vines; they had not been pruned this season, and some of the buds were breaking. He walked up and down between the rows as though he felt himself to be the master of the year's vintage.

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Trees, flowers, vines, green growth, blue water and sky, violet headlands floating in the sea. If life on this Provençal coast was a compromise, surely it could be a very beautiful compromise?

He wandered down to the house, and noticed that in the morning he had forgotten to close the shutters. He had been too excited, too much in a hurry to get back to the Agence Smith. He unlocked the old door and went in to close shutters and windows, but instead of closing them he kept wandering about the house, and passing in and out of the long windows that opened on the terrace. He seemed to feel the place becoming pleasantly and exquisitely his.

He ascended to one of the bedrooms and looked at the view. He could see St. Trophime all brilliant in the late sunlight, and he was glad of St. Trophime. It was a neighbourly little town; he was beginning to feel friendly towards St. Trophime.


He thought: "She ought to be happy here. It's rather big, of course, but it will be part of the job. We are going to be workers. Yes. I shall be able to take my coat off. Flowers and fruit and honey and wine."

If he bought Le Paradis, should he tell her? That is to say—should he tell her that it looked like Le Paradis, or should he keep it as a surprise?

Rather a delightful ideal! He might just say, "Oh, I've bought a little place at St. Trophime. Yes, not a bad little place. Of course, if you don't like it—"

As he closed the shutters he realized that Elsie would see Le Paradis for the first time in the spring of the year, yes, just when the fruit blossom was coming out and the trees were growing green, and those iris plants were making a purple pool down by the gate.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



VANE bought Le Paradis.

The Agence Smith had warned him that he would have to pay a tax of twenty-five per cent of the purchase value to the State, though had he bought a piece of land and built a house there would have been no tax. Mr. Grylls's surveyor from Nice, a gentleman who had gone about with the air of the complete pessimist, and who sniffed perpetually while scribbling in a little book, had put in an unexpectedly favourable report. The structure was sound, the sanitation in order, and the property was one that would appreciate in value. Vane had written to Stuart Blagden, instructing him to sell stock to the value of seven thousand pounds, and the Agence Smith had all the necessary documents prepared.

Mr. Smith was banker, estate agent, librarian, travel bureau, and also he had in him the pith of a philosopher. Vane was seeing a good deal of this lean and dusty and blue-eyed person who sucked a pipe even when it was empty, and was never out of temper even when people to whom he had let villas came and complained about the bath-taps, or the lock on the garage door.

Vane liked the man, and the more he saw of him the more he liked him.

"Finding the right place to live in," said Mr. Smith, "is about as big a problem as finding the right woman to live with," and being a bachelor he could assert that as far as he was concerned, a part of the problem had remained unsolved. "You've got a very fine property there. Peaceful, yes, even when St. Trophime begins to get gay."

Moreover, he supplied Vane with some very good advice.

"If you have any money, don't let St. Trophime know too much about it. Haggle over everything. You can't live in France without haggling."

"When you get your estimates, let me see them. Probably they will need thirty per cent subtracting."

"If you want a gardener, get an Italian, not a Provençal."

"Servants? Yes, that's another problem. You had better let me make inquiries. Northern French or Italian."

Actually, for a week Vane had been the prospective owner of Le Paradis before he discovered the hill-side above the pinewood. This wild stretch of *maquis* did not belong to him, but it was there for anyone to own who cared to wander about among the rocks. The white aromatic garden was in flower, pink and white cistus, lavender, yellow broom, genista, little purple anemones, orchids, violets. Its beauty was like that of a Swiss or Bavarian hill-side in June, almost unbelievable, and when Vane first saw it—he said to himself: "It isn't true."

But it was true, however transient the truth might be, and seeing it with his own eyes, he saw it also with the eyes of Elsie. He could smell it; he could touch it. And below, sheltered by the pines, lay that secret, shaded, white old house, with its orchard and its vineyard, and its windows opening on the sea.

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He thought to himself, "She ought to be happy here," and picking some of the wild lavender and a few sprigs of cistus with buds that were yet to open, he bought a little *panier* at the "Bazaar" at St. Trophime, and took the smell of the *maquis* with him to the Maison Masquée. It was the act of a man who had grown gently sentimental, while Elsie, stitching daily at blue linen coats and trousers, was ceasing to be sentimental. This cloistered life was too real. She sat and sat and sat and thought of all the unhappy things that might happen, of the realities that she might lose. For life was no longer a pretty or a picturesque affair, like a "Raphael" in a Roman gallery; it was meat and drink and money and man.

She watched Vane's eyes. She was afraid, and for the first few moments she would look at him as though to see him as a stranger, without wilful illusion, as something that might cease to be hers. She would appear inarticulate and tense and distraught, and sometimes she would forget to raise her mask. She wanted to look at him; to try and read him, while her self remained hidden.

He placed the basket on the table. He had been obliged to show its contents to an official.

"Guess what's inside."

Her lips quivered. She was thinking how well he looked, how brown, how sure of things. She was glad.

"Flowers?"

"Right. Open it."

She opened the basket and found the cistus and the lavender, and taking up a sprig of the lavender she smelled it.

"Wild flowers."

"Yes. The cistus ought to open in water. Guess again."

She looked at him a little hesitantly.

"I'm not very good at guessing."

"Well, these came from the hills above St. Trophime. Yes, the

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whole hill-side is ablaze with them. And just below—and not far from the sea I've bought a little place."

He was smiling at her.

"Yes—I know, you ought to have seen it too, but as there is some work to be done, I thought I'd go ahead."

"You've bought it?"

"Only—on the presumption that you'll like it. I think you will like it. If you don't, I can easily get rid of it."

She looked strangely confused. She put out a hand and laid it half timidly on one of his.

"Of course—I shall like it. Tell me, is it really there?"

"Absolutely; solid and white, with green shutters."

"Has it a garden?"

"Oh, rather, and fruit trees and vines. But what I want to know is, dear, you won't feel afraid of a house?"

Her eyes looked at him widely.

"Afraid?"

"Well, I'm told that in these days so many women are afraid of houses. I don't want to be selfish, but I'm so sick of drifting."

He noticed that she closed her eyes momentarily.

"Is it by itself?"

"Quite. But St. Trophime is quite near, and St. Trophime—"

"Oh—I didn't mean that, Hal. I don't think I should mind—even— But I've never had a house of my very own."

"You're not frightened?"

"Oh, my dear, it's just what I want. I can sit and sit and think about it. Things—that are your very own, things that won't run away from you. Everybody now seems to be running away from what is— Life's so like an hotel or a station, and I'm not made that way, no, I don't know why, but I'm not."

He held her hand firmly.

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"Elsie—we've got a vineyard."

"A vineyard!"

"Yes, and a terrace with shady pergolas. And quite a lot of trees. You should see the irises in flower. Oh, I wanted to ask you, what colour would you like the *salon*?"

"The *salon*?"

"Well, the drawing-room."

"How many windows has it?"

"Three. And out of one you walk on to the terrace."

"How lovely!"

She thought for a moment, but the sudden reality of the house seemed to have confused her.

"I can't think—Hal. I'll leave it to you. All I can think of is that I'd like soft colours."

He produced a paper, a ground plan of the house, and a second plan of the upper floor.

"I'll leave this with you, dear. You think it over and make notes on the plan, and post it to me with your next letter."

"It looks quite a large house, Hal."

"Oh, no, not too large. Of course—we shall have to have a couple of maids."

"Need we?"

"You can't do all the work."

"Oh, you don't know. I did it at home. And has it a name—yet?"

"Oh, yes, I'm keeping the old name, *Le Paradis*."

They looked at each other and sudden soft laughter came to them.

II

St. Trophime possessed only one plumber, and though he was an excellent fellow and not at all like the plumbers in *Punch*, he

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could not be expected to deal expeditiously with the *chauffage central* of Le Paradis, and Vane accepted the tender of a Cannes firm. Mr. Smith, whose knowledge of architectural and sanitary affairs appeared to be as universal as his name, checked the estimate and caused it to be amended. So, for the time being, Le Paradis ceased to be a place of peace, and men hammered and filed iron piping there, and whenever Vane appeared in the house the noise rose to a crescendo.

But he had his coat off in the garden. He had bought a selection of garden tools at the local ironmonger's, and for the first month he did little but act as a kind of amateur scavenger. He discovered that the previous occupants of Le Paradis had—after the fashion of the Latins—broadcast their rubbish with the most amazing prodigality. He found the remains of an old spring mattress in one of the shrubberies. Bottles and tins abounded. The pine wood was full of dead trees and fallen branches, and he collected this wood and stored it in one of the outhouses. The vigorous young weeds in the vineyard kept him busy, and in hardening himself to the use of the queer, mattock-like tool native to those parts, he found that his hands were soft and his back very much a back.

He collected all Le Paradis rubbish, and made a dump near the upper gate, and a blue cart—arranged for by Mr. Smith—came up and removed the dump to St. Trophime's burial ground for such matter. St. Trophime was beginning to realize that the new owner of Le Paradis was something of an oddity, but St. Trophime was accustomed to oddities, especially so in the summer. There were people who wore sandals or rope soled shoes—and little else. Vane was more conventional than that, even when the sun began to gather strength. He set out from the Hotel des Palmiers at nine o'clock each morning, carrying a pair of blue linen trousers—just such trousers as Elsie was creating—and his picnic lunch in a

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yellow bag. At Le Paradis he changed into those blue trousers, using one of the upper rooms as a dressing-room, and got to work.

The gentlemen who were fixing radiators observed him from the windows. They discussed him and his affairs. A mad Englishman with money blistering his hands! If he had money, why work?

But Vane allowed himself interludes, for Le Paradis was a place that had a pleasant way of saying: "Now, my dear, let us be lazy together for five minutes. A little meditation, a little occasion when one stands and stares"—and Vane and Le Paradis were becoming intimate. The men with files and hammers and hack-saws were a mere passing affront to its peace. They would tighten up the last nut and depart.

Vane would stand amid the green growth, in the sunlight or under the shade of a tree, and look at life with a kind of gentle friendliness, for life itself had become so full of friendly and familiar things, a lizard on a wall, a magpie in flight, some tree laying a gentle shadow on the rank green herbage, some new flower showing its face, the changing lights along the coast and on the sea, moments when the world seemed too beautiful to be real. Also, he would have some saying of Elsie's in his mind.

"I think I would like the *salon* a soft green and old gold."

"If I must have a cook, Hal, I'd like her to be—rather mature."

"Sometimes—when I sit here—I feel that I can see everything. No, don't send me a photograph; photographs aren't quite real. I like my own picture."

"Could I have a Hoover?"

And Vane would smile to himself. Of course the *salon* would be green and old gold, and Elsie shall have her Hoover.

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III

He had written to her—"Shall we have the radiators gilded?"—and as she sat and sewed she wondered whether he realized how the asking of such questions helped her. For this house which she had never seen save through his eyes, was like the green hill which she could look at through her prison window. It was there, solid and actual and lovely, as reassuring and consoling as some familiar and unfickle face.

This house! While sitting in this little white cell she seemed able to transport herself to that other place, and to wander about the rooms and passages, and to feel the shell of a home sheltering her from the world's vicissitudes. She wanted to be sheltered. She wanted to possess the familiar and friendly fittings of a home, to be able to touch them and feel that they would not fly away. This unseen but lovely house made her feel secure.

He told her all sorts of things in his letters, and all these details were very precious to her.

"I'm having the old iron gates painted a faded blue. What do you think about it?"

"I am going to leave the furnishing until we can do it together."

"I've filled the stone vases on the balustrade with trailing geraniums."

"The bath is in. Really—I want to have a splash in it."

"When you go up into the pinewood and look down through the crowded trunks at the sea—its blueness is beyond words."

"Hooray, the last radiator's fixed. The decorators begin next week."

"St. Trophime's becoming quite gay. We shall get a lot of amusement out of St. Trophime. It's full of what my friend Smith calls 'The New Nakedness.'"

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"I've bought a beret. You'll have to wear a beret. It will suit you."

"You should see the young vine leaves turning colour."

"I'm having French lessons. It's necessary. So many technicalities, my dear. I learn a dozen new words every night before I switch off the light."

There was a boyishness in his letters, a zest that was as brown as his skin. At the last visit he had pulled up his sleeves and shown her his arms all brown to the elbow. "That's life, reality. One becomes a sort of bleached parasitic thing in hotels."

She loved him, and sometimes her love was so strong that she became afraid of the four blank walls and the closed door. She was shut in, and she wanted to be with him.

But the house assuaged her fear. It seemed to symbolize the solidity of his purpose, and to contain the "You and I" of an increasing comradeship. It was a sanctuary for her thoughts, a quiet and pleasant place into which her love entered and looked about it with happy, trustful eyes. It was like something that grew and in growing made her feel that everything was meant.

She would get up and look at her green hill with its cloud of trees, and draw her breath deeply and feel comforted.

She could go on sewing and sewing, and taking her daily walk in the parade ground, and realize that this prison life was a kind of tranquil mechanism. It was not her. Her body might be here, but her spirit was elsewhere, very close to him all the time, because the house was teaching her that she was needed.

IV

One evening in June, all that had been passing to and fro so quietly in her inward world seemed to fly like a bird to the window and beat its wings there.

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She wanted to tell him things, to pour herself out, to make a complete and dear confession.

She sat down at her little table and wrote:

HAL,

I don't know how to begin this, but I feel as though I have opened a window. We have windows in ourselves, haven't we? but so often they are shut up and covered with curtains. I sit here and sew—and I think. Days pass—and they just pass. I was frightened when I came here, but I don't think that I am frightened any longer.

Tell me. I must know. Is the house yours—as well as mine? You're not just pretending? Oh, my dear, don't be afraid to tell me. If it's just—kindness, your most dear kindness. Do you understand?

I've been sitting and thinking and feeling so much. In a place such as this one seems to get close to the real things, the simple realities that matter.

Think of what my life was for six months. It's a parasitic world—that other world. You're just a mouth. There was a time when I used to envy people who could travel from hotel to hotel, but now I know how pitiful those lives are.

They are not real. Just waiting for meals, and getting bored, and seeing all sorts of things that you forget. And no one is really ready for meals, for no one has worked for them.

Oh, my dear, I must be one of those women whom everybody despises these days. I'm simply starving to do things, all the little silly simple little things that are out of fashion.

Drudgery? How absurd! I have seen drudgery—far worse drudgery among the women who are trying to amuse themselves. Having emancipated yourself from the boredom of

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domesticity, you try to kill a far more ghastly ennui with little drinks and cigarettes, and Bridge. You never do anything for yourself, anything that is real and worth while. Your breakfast is brought to you in bed; you spend half the morning fumbling with clothes, complexion and hair. Your food is cooked and brought to you. Your clothes are designed and made for you. You fribble all through the day. You become a sort of sponge, a milliner's model, a coiffeur's block.

I want to work.

But my emancipation has its skirts caught in a door. Yes, they must be rather long skirts and out of fashion.

If I want to do things, real things with my hands—in a house and in a garden, is it for myself alone?

Oh, my dear, understand what home means to me. Don't just be infinitely kind. I sit here and sew and sew, and I think. And what do I think about—"Shall we have the radiators gilded?" "What about rugs and polished floors?" "Green and gold in the *salon*." "Our bath!" "The little vine leaves turning green." You—with your brown arms and your beret.

I want to live in that world and work in it, but I want to feel that you'll be loving it as I shall love it.

v

His reply to that letter of hers was like something growing out of the soil.

I think I'm forty-six years old, or thereabouts. How old was Adam when he met Eve? And no damned serpent is going to fool us into stealing apples and asking silly questions.

My dear, I'm in love for the first time in my life, and at my age! Well, there's a sort of finality in that sort of affair. And,

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like most men, I'm damned selfish, and fond of my own comforts. I had fifteen years of thinking. Yes, so much of the modern mood seems to be that of an hotel.

Damned places, thrice-damned places.

So, you see, how inevitable you and the house are.

They are making the *salon* green and gold.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



EARLY in June St. Trophime became so gay that Vane evacuated the Hotel des Palmiers, or it would be more accurate to say that he was driven from it by one of England's new celebrities, who arrived with two large cars and a wife and other accessories. The party, which grew in noise and numbers from day to day, demanded the whole top floor of the Hotel des Palmiers, and Vane was crowded out. These bright people came to bed at all hours, and ragged and sang in the corridors, and were for ever rushing out to bathe by daylight and by moonlight. The hotel was becoming too supremely animated. On the stairs he met the celebrity, a long, lean, sallow person upon whose narrow face a little sneering smile seemed to flicker, clad in a scarlet bathing dress and giving a young creature a ride upon his back. The young thing's legs stuck out and Vane had to take the wall in order to let them pass.

Vane went to see friend Smith.

"I say—is there any furniture to be had in St. Trophime? I want a bed and a few things like that. The Palmiers's impossible."

"Too hot for you?"

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"It's a sort of cabaret show. These new people seem to have bought it, and they run it."

Mr. Smith looked amused.

"Don't you know who the chief clown is?"

"No."

"Your education has been neglected. Guess."

"Someone rather new and rather rich."

"No, quite aristocrat. Haven't you heard of Sir Maurice Pettard, the latest convert to socialism, and its new firebrand?"

"I've seen him in the papers."

"Well, that's the man."

"But he came down here with two large cars, and a whole collection of women."

"You can't see the social reformer in him?"

"In spite of his red bathing costume."

"Not exactly."

"No."

Mr. Smith laughed.

"Well, perhaps not. He's one of those devilish clever fellows who mean to make the best of both worlds. Fulminating to Lancashire mill-hands one day, and painting St. Trophime red the next. A sort of political Mephistopheles, and possibly—England's future premier. Well, what's the idea?"

"I am going to camp at Le Paradis. I can make my own bed and breakfast coffee, and lunch on bread and cheese and fruit, and get my dinner at the Miramar."

"And sleep in peace."

"Well, isn't peace one of the most blessed things on earth?"

Mr. Smith looked a little sad.

"Yes, one of the universals, but life's so relative."

He advised Vane to take a car and visit St. Raphael and "Les

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Dames de France," and if Vane's French wasn't adequate he was quite ready to go with him. Vane thought he could manage, and he managed so well that a light *camion* deposited an assortment of domestic articles at Le Paradis on the following day. It was a great day for Vane. He set up the bed, and arranged the limited amount of furniture, and garnished the shelves and the cupboards in the kitchen. His bed-making was a little crude, but when he had smoked a pipe on the terrace by moonlight, and locked his very own front door, and turned on his very own electric light, he went to bed like some blessed patriarch.

He slept as he hadn't slept for weeks, and woke to find the green slats of the shutters ribbed with gold.

Each morning he could look at the closed jalousies, and if they were streaked with early fire he would know the day was good.

He wrote to Elsie:

I'm here. I couldn't stand any more hotel. The peace of this place is beyond words. Making your own bed is—really—a sort of sacrament.

But if Van was coming to know St. Trophime, St. Trophime was not uninterested in Vane. It began to speak of him as an eccentric and wealthy Englishman who was his own gardener and *femme de chambre* and cook in a house that should have accommodated at least three servants. St. Trophime saw him in its shops, and sitting at one of the blue tables outside the Café de Paris, and St. Trophime was a tolerant little town. Its summer season was especially a season of tolerance, when the *plage* and the casino and the villas and the hotels became full of "originals." St. Trophime shrugged its shoulders and chuckled and made money, and if the gay world was a Noah's Ark, and the giraffe

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somehow got paired with the rhinoceros—well, that was not St. Trophime's affair. If people paid for their beds they could sleep how and with whom they pleased.

St. Trophime was not like St. Pierre, the little town on the other side of the bay. St. Pierre indeed was a sink of iniquity.

"Oh, *la-la*, what goings-on!"

And St. Pierre threw back the same expression across the limpid blueness of the bay.

"Oh, *la-la*, over there is St. Trophime—what goings-on!"

St. Trophime said that St. Pierre sold dope and doctored drinks, and was Sodom and Singapore mated, and that half the ladies who arrived there for the season were *cocottes* from Marseilles and Paris, and that its male visitors painted their faces and wore corsets.

"Oh, *la-la*, what goings-on!"

And St. Pierre said exactly the same things about St. Trophime.

But neither St. Pierre nor St. Trophime were any the less happy or prosperous, and each was highly amused by the season's wickedness, and by the moonlight parades in the semi-nude on the sands. St. Trophime was sufficiently sexed, and also sufficiently human, to know that in the new world the casino and not the Church was sacred.

Vane, strolling down in the cool of the evening to sit with Mr. Smith under the plane trees of the Café de Paris, saw this new world manifesting itself. Mr. Smith had watched it in the bud and in the flower, and he knew that the growth was as old as time. Also, he was almost as tolerant as St. Trophime.

"Ever wandered along the beach after dark, old man?"

No, Vane hadn't.

"Well, if you're not feeling like being *de trop*, don't."

A young thing came and sat with a man at a neighbouring

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table. She was very tall and very slender, and her rather high, bald forehead was tightly clasped by a little black hat. She had no eyebrows. Her eyes were glassy and protuberant, her skin was like wax. Vane noticed that her lips and her finger-nails were tinted the same colour—a kind of bright cerise. They looked sore. She slouched and drank a little drink, and was mute, and her glassy eyes seemed to see everything and nothing.

Mr. Smith discovered Vane looking with an air of puzzled and shy seriousness at this product, and he was amused. What did old Vane make of this piece of confectionery? Their intimacy had reached the stage when masculine minds attach the “old” to the Vane and the Smith.

“Bad lad! Mustn’t stare.”

Vane’s profile came round to him with a little whimsical smile.

“Was I? But, you know, it staggers me.”

“What?”

“That sort of thing.”

Mr. Smith gave one of his dry chuckles.

“What I call the transient type. The transient—not the permanent—is *à la mode*. I’ll tell you what it reminds me of. No, I won’t—it’s rather vulgar.”

“I like vulgar things.”

“Oh, shame! Well—you know the kids’ idea, to suck a sweet until the colour comes off—and then you extrude it.”

“Yes, it is rather vulgar, old man, but it does apply. The paint comes off rather quickly, I should imagine.”

“Probably—after one week-end.”

Vane, looking absurdly serious, made a very crude remark.

“Fancy marrying—”

Almost friend Smith was shocked. He reproved him.

“Marriage isn’t a serious subject. Our institutions are rather like

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the new villas—only painted to last a season. The new world likes it like that.”

“You don’t.”

“Only because I’m a bit too old, and I can’t take a coat of new paint. That’s all the difference there is to it.”

Vane said: “Rot.”

II

That month he bought a car. It was not a very large or a very expensive car, but it was *chic*—a Renault coupé with a French-grey body picked out with Cambridge blue. It had a biscuit-coloured hood and silver disk wheels.

For Vane had decided that a car was necessary, and this car was also to be Elsie’s car, and he told her all about it.

“You see, I’m always having to go shopping in St. Trophime, and I came back cluttered up with parcels. I tried a string-bag, but, my dear, there’s something disgusting about string-bags. Besides, we shall want a car. All sorts of funny little places we can drive to. Besides, I shall rather enjoy pottering with the machinery, and being my own chauffeur.”

St. Trophime thought Le Paradis’s car a very modish vehicle, and so it was, and if Vane was a little selfconscious about the smartness of the new car, and washed and polished it in Le Paradis’s courtyard under the shade of the plane trees, he was nothing of a Narcissus. He did not know that some of St. Trophime’s inhabitants thought him a very attractive person—a long, slim and rather boyish creature with two very blue eyes in a very brown face. He had an air; he was aloof and elusive, and he had money.

St. Trophime’s “Bazaar” was owned by a little woman with very black hair, a skin like smoked ivory, and a provocative red

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mouth. She was a handsome little hen, and rather like a hen in her curves, with a breast and a tail, and her name was Rennoir—Josephine Rennoir. Now, the Bazaar was a place in which you could buy anything from a bathing-dress to an enamelled teapot, and when any other shops could not supply an article it sent you to Madame Rennoir. Vane, whose amateur housekeeping was always discovering itself minus some simple article, found the Bazaar invaluable. He went in on various occasions to buy soap, a cork-screw, a bathing-dress, ink, note-paper, a fly-whisk, various kitchen utensils.

He bought his first beret from Josephine Rennoir, and the little lady fitted it for him as though he was a schoolboy, and rather a nice schoolboy.

His first beret having come in contact with some wet paint, he went to the Bazaar for a second, and Madame opened the drawer that contained berets and proceeded to try them on Vane's head, and she did it so charmingly and with such an easy roguishness that he became selfconscious.

His selfconsciousness provoked Josephine still further. Already she had cast a black and considering eye upon the Englishman. If she was hot-blooded, she was nicely shrewd.

"Monsieur must wear it a little on one side."

She adjusted it, and he bent his head to her, and was suddenly aware of her perfect skin and of that luscious little mouth.

She stood off and eyed him, and her pose was provoking.

"No, no, it is not quite smart enough for monsieur. We will try another."

She chattered all the time, and flicked him with audacious glances. She put another beret on his head, and her little soft warm hands touched him.

"*Voilà!* Monsieur has just the head and face for a beret."

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She took him by the arm and led him to a mirror, and stood there close beside him, archly black and white. There were two people in the picture. Almost she snuggled up against him, and suddenly Vane felt shy.

Yes, the beret was just the thing, and how much did he owe madame? Nineteen francs. But she would put it down to him. Monsieur Vane was so good a customer that he could be allowed credit. And what a charming new car that was of his! So *chic*. Josephine followed him out to the pavement, and poked her black head and strong and shapely shoulders into the coupé.

Yes, she adored the automobilism. Had Mr. Vane been to St. Pierre on a Sunday and visited the Café des Fleurs? No? It really was most droll and amusing at St. Pierre. No, *malheureusement*, she had no car of her own, but she loved expeditions, distractions. Oh, certainly.

Vane eyed her shyly as though she was a pleasant and mischievous creature who did not realize— No, of course she didn't realize. He had emerged from those fifteen years of solitude with a curiously innocent attitude towards women. He held the door of the car, and waited for her to remove her perfumed person. He saw that she had a little brown mole on the back of her neck. Quite a number of men had kissed that mole, but he did not know it.

He said: "I must go to St. Pierre some Sunday," and Josephine gave him an oblique and sidelong stare, and nodded her head at him.

"Oh, most certainly."

She waited, but Vane had no idea of playing at bob-cherry, but got rather hurriedly into the car, and pressed the self-starter button. He smiled at Josephine, and made an awkward grab at his beret.

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"Au revoir, madame."

She watched him drive away, and gave a little wriggle of the shoulders. What provoking timidity! And in such a big, brown, boyish thing! Yes, a little hypnotism, a little suggestion might be necessary. Such affairs were very amusing and—on occasions—lucrative.

Vane did not go near the Bazaar for a week, and then, being in sudden need of some urgent trifles, he wrote out a list on a piece of paper and, walking rapidly into the shop, he tried to present the paper to one of Josephine's assistants. Madame was in the *caisse* at the moment, but she saw him, floated out and enveloped him with voice and glances. She reft the piece of paper from the assistant, scrutinized his list, pouted her very red lips.

No, she was desolated, but some of the articles were not in stock. Paint-brushes! They could be had elsewhere in St. Trophime, but she did not say so. And egg-cups! How simple of monsieur not to have thought before of egg-cups. But she would obtain everything, yes, at once. It was urgent. The goods should be delivered at Le Paradis.

She made a kind of seductive and circular sound of the name. She stood very close to Vane, and her upward glances had a smoky and veiled intentness. Monsieur should have his paint-brushes—oh, most certainly. It was her own particular desire that monsieur should have everything that he might like to order.

III

Early in the morning Vane bathed, running down the lane in a dark blue bathing-dress and rope-soled shoes to a flat rock in a little cove. He had had his splash and his swim before the New Nakedness had got itself out of bed, and now that the summer sun was tanning this southern coast, and turning everything save

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the trees and the *maquis* and the vine leaves brown, Vane had to give little drinks to his flower borders and to splash water over the stone vases on the terrace. He trailed a hose hither and thither, in the early morning and in the cool of the evening.

Life was teaching him many things—how to make an omelette and to concoct Irish stew.

He lunched at eleven, and at twelve he closed the shutters and took a siesta. At four he made himself tea. After tea there was more trailing of the hose, and not till seven did he put off his blue linen trousers and white tennis shirt, and change into a lounge suit. It was his custom to stroll down to St. Trophime and dine at the Miramar, a little restaurant near the Agency, where the tables were laid under a canopy of vines. The white pillars of the pergola split the sea into a series of blue panels. Across the bay the lights of St. Pierre would begin to twinkle as the dusk came down.

Sometimes Friend Smith dined with him here.

The Miramar had its orchestra; so had the casino, and St. Trophime danced.

Vane would always remember the night when Friend Smith strolled back with him to Le Paradis, and they sat in deck chairs on the terrace and watched the moon come up, and Vane told this other man the truth about himself.

"I suppose if St. Trophime knew—"

Mr. Smith sprawled with his long thin legs crossed.

"Do you want it to know?"

"Well, why shouldn't it? The woman I am going to marry knows."

Mr. Smith made a little noise in his throat.

"I shouldn't worry about St. Trophime, old man. I don't think St. Trophime cares a damn about our pasts—so long as we pay our bills."

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Vane sat sideways as though startled. Why had Friend Smith spoken in the plural? The other voice went on:

"St. Trophime, old man, is full of pasts and presents and futures. Yes, we might say that we all carry tattoo marks of some sort or other—a rope, or a bleeding heart, or a love knot. I've got one on my chest."

"You?"

"Want to see it?"

"It makes no difference to me."

"Same here. If your woman's the sort—"

"She is."

"Well, why worry?"

On this other night Vane walked back alone to Le Paradis, and a moon was shining, and the avenue of cypresses was like a high black wall. He noticed that the iron gate was open, and his impression was that he had left it closed. He swung it to, and went slowly up between the cypresses, with little slants of moonlight meeting and crossing and making a moth-like glimmer. He was thinking of Elsie. In this warm, southern world he was realizing that—being man—he needed Elsie as woman. But how differently did he need her, even though the sun was in his heart and loins, not as mere nakedness, but as one whose dear flesh would wear the veil of the spirit. He knew and was sure that he would feel strangely gentle towards Elsie, and that even in the most intimate of moments she would be Elsie, not mere flesh.

And children? They had discussed the problem in their letters, and they had decided that they did not wish for children. They would have had too many things to explain to their children, and to other people's children.

Vane could have exclaimed: "Thank heaven, we people with pasts can fool old Nature," and he might have added: "If only

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people with futures would be as consciously contraceptive as those with pasts!"

But Nature came very near fooling him on that summer night. He had reached the top of the steps leading to the terrace, and was moving towards the two deck-chairs that had got themselves well bleached in the sun, when he realized that a dark object was obscuring the canvas of one chair. It was occupied, and he stood fast and stared.

"Hallo!"

The object gave him a little bubble of laughter.

"I have brought monsieur's paint-brushes and his egg-cups. Yes, it was a promise, was it not?"

He was aware of her as a pale face and a perfume that seemed to rise promiscuously from her chair. She flourished a little white parcel at him.

"*Voilà!* It is so very warm to-night, and I sat down. Won't monsieur sit down in one of his own chairs? You see—I have to be my own errand-boy after the shop closes. Labour is so expensive. Yes, and I am saving up for a new shop-front, and that, too, is very expensive."

She laughed. Delightful candour! New shop-fronts and plate-glass, and two chairs intimately posed! And in the moonlight he was aware of her hands busy with a bag. She was proceeding to powder her nose.

He stood rigid. He was aware of a little shiver flickering down his spine, and suddenly he knew that if he sat down in that other chair on this summer night he might cease to be quite responsible. He saw her make a little wriggling movement, an undulation of the hips, and she poked her chin at him.

"Sit down, little one, and I will powder your face for you."

His rigid legs came to life. They felt curiously brittle as he

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walked round the two chairs towards the house.

"Excuse me, madame."

He looked at the white house and the shutters, and the inspiration came to him. He put his head back and shouted:

"Elsie—Elsie—are you there? The lady has come with some things from the 'Bazaar.'"

Silence and moonlight and closed shutters! He repeated the invocation.

"Elsie—hallo!"

And then he spoke politely over his shoulder.

"Excuse me, madame, but my wife must be in the kitchen. Yes, we have no servant yet. I will go and find her."

He waited for ten minutes in the dark house, standing with his back applied firmly to a wall, and his hands in his trouser pockets. He did not have to make himself think of Elsie. He had a strangely vivid vision of her sitting sewing in a little white room, and in himself he discovered a triumphant tenderness. Damn that woman! He went softly to the door, and looked out and saw the sagging canvases of the two chairs equally slack in the moonlight. The provocation had departed.

From below he heard the emphatic clang of an iron gate, and without realizing the inward significance of the act, he took off his beret and fanned himself.

He resolved that a padlock and chain should be attached to that gate.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



SUMMER heat.

There were days when from the shaded loggias of Le Paradis, St. Trophime and its sea and *plage* looked like a piece of blue and white china, and very brittle china at that. Or its half-moon of sand suggested one of those crescents of fancy bread powdered with coloured comfits—groves of little figures in brilliant bathing frocks, umbrellas, tents. By day St. Trophime burned itself brown; it had legs of bronze, and at night it danced, in and out of the sea and under the plane trees, and gambled, and did everything that St. Pierre did on the other side of the water. But for its brown legs it would have appeared a very decadent town, but being just the love-parade of the world's bright young things, it conceived itself to be marvellously advanced in reverting to the primitive.

Mr. Smith sipped his cinzano and was tolerant.

"These young things think they have put the clock on a thousand years, bless 'em. I guess Pompeii could have shown them all this sort of newness."

Madame Josephine had fitted a beret to the head of an American he-man, and was taking him out by moonlight and chanting the

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same seductive little song. "A new shop-front, *chéri*, and plate-glass is so very expensive." She was an excellent business woman, and the gentleman from Detroit, finding her shop-front so very attractive, paid for the new glass. And perhaps next season L'Amour would present her with a nice little automobile that could be used both for pleasure and for business.

The "Bazaar" was out of bounds for Vane, but St. Trophime supplied him with compensations. He met Miss Wise, who kept the Tea Parlour, a little primrose of a woman with the face of a saint, and old Trite who ran a market-garden and grew St. Trophime's flowers. Old Trite had a face like an ancient briar pipe, and he went about in a white linen suit and a pair of sandals. He knew every swear word in the French language, and sometimes he used them. St. Trophime had its little coterie of human oddities, and they were rather lovable oddities, and Vane was glad of them. There would be people for Elsie to know. For man is a social animal, and without society there is no Christ.

It was old Trite who supplied him with an idea.

"Eggs, my lad, eggs. Haven't you noticed that St. Trophime can never get enough eggs?"

Vane had noticed it, and the eggs were not as brown as the legs.

"Well, if you want a job, it's sitting like Humpty-Dumpty waiting to fall on you."

"Keep a poultry farm?"

"Money in it, my lad."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"I've got enough money to keep me in clean shirts. Get Jobber Smith to rent you that bit of land next you which no one will buy. No, don't foul up your own garden. No, it's not a pun. But down here by this succulent sea a man has to have himself and something in hand."

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Vane understood what old man Trite was driving at.

"A job, even if it happens to be persuading hens to lay eggs?"

"Yep. Better than laying in too many little drinks. My God, that sounds like preaching. Have another gin and vermouth."

Both Vane and Le Paradis bore the heat very well, for this little valley was a trough down which moisture seeped from the hills behind St. Trophime, and the roots of the vines were always moist. There was shade to be had, and breezes came from the sea and from the mountains. Certainly there was one dreadful week when the mistral blew, and the July sun and the northern wind fought a battle over St. Trophime in which both combatants were lost in clouds of dust. Tempers were short and faces buttoned up. Even Mr. Smith succumbed. He shut up the agency for three whole days, and disappeared, but on the fourth morning he was there as usual, slightly red about the eyelids and bleached about the jaws.

He said to Vane: "Yes, my lad; after three days of that hot and windy hell I begin to find myself reaching for the inkpot when some fussy fool comes in to work off a grievance. Down go the shutters, or I should throw that damned inkpot."

He confessed that he did not sleep very well in the height of the season, for St. Trophime became Spanish in its hours, and dined at ten, and drove about in cars, and went home noisily to its villas and hotels. Vane made a suggestion. Why shouldn't Smith join him at Le Paradis for the summer months? for at Le Paradis sleep was deeper and less brittle than in the town.

"It's only a question of fitting up a bedroom, and I could manage your breakfast."

Mr. Smith screwed up his blue eyes.

"Mean it?"

"Of course I mean it."

"I'll come."

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He did not ask Vane where he went each week when the grey and blue car pulled out of the Le Paradis garage with a suit-case in the luggage-holder, but Vane told him, though not everything. He said that the girl who was going to marry him had a post at Nice, and that her agreement with her employers did not end till the spring, and that she was the kind of woman who honoured her word. They were to be married at Nice as soon as she was free, and then Le Paradis would be furnished as it should be furnished.

"I suppose your wife will want a woman to help?"

"I want her to have two, but she says she can manage with a cook."

Mr. Smith cocked his pipe, a trick of his when he had an idea.

"Right you are. I'll get you Marie. She's booked for the summer, but she's the one and only treasure of St. Trophime."

"Would she come?"

"I guess she would. Marie is rather tired of promiscuous people. She's a Breton. She'd stay put, especially if you don't mind cats."

"Why cats?"

"Oh, she's got two of 'em, Felix and Fifine—quite a respectable and domesticated couple."

"I dare say we could bear with Marie's cats."

II

Elsie's world was a different world, for La Maison Masquée was full of a diffused white glare, and while Vane was turning to bronze, she became bleached. Such heat was new to her, especially indoor heat, and there was no escape from it.

The nights were even more trying than the days, for the walls seemed to absorb the heat rays during the day and deliver them up again through the darkness. Sleep was elusive, and she would lie awake and almost naked, listening to the restlessness of her

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neighbours. The whole prison seemed to be a place of stifling distress. She had next her a little woman from the north, a manicurist who had been sentenced for some petty theft, and at night Elsie would hear the creaking of the bed, and then the sound of footsteps going to and fro. Her neighbour could not rest.

Elsie would get out of bed and stand at her window, and one night she heard a little moaning from the window on her right.

"Oh, *mon Dieu*, oh, *mon Dieu*, if one could sleep."

She was moved to speak to the girl at the other window.

"Are you too from the north?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I am English. It is terrible, this heat."

"Yes, the nights are worse than the days. One asks to be able to forget—at night. My pillow is like a piece of toast."

"Are you to be here long?"

"Long! Only seven more days. But when one goes out—well, what does one do? Go on the streets!"

"Oh, you mustn't do that. You'll find work."

"Work, my dear. Oh, yes—and I have lost my lover. Not a letter, not a visit. Well, what does it matter! And you?"

"I have seven more months."

"And then?"

"I am going to be married."

"Oh, marriage! That may be as bad as a prison. Say, have you tried putting a wet towel on your pillow?"

"No."

"Try it, and you'll dream that an old man's kissing you," and she ended with a cynical little giggle.

Elsie's window faced south, and after ten more exhausting days and nights she put in a petition to be moved. They sent the prison doctor to see her, and she told him that she was sleeping badly

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and could not take her food, and that during the day she could not keep her attention fixed upon her work. She had other troubles due to the sedentary life, and the doctor found her anæmic.

Being somewhat humane, he advised a change of accommodation, and the logical French transferred Elsie to a cell whose window faced north. Obviously, if she was intolerant of heat she should be supplied with its opposite, and during the height of the summer heat she was more comfortable in that northern cell. She did not know that they would keep her in that sunless cell during the winter. They had humoured her once, and that should be sufficient. A prison was neither a health resort nor a pleasure-house, and though Elsie lost her green hill and its trees, she could keep her inward picture of *Le Paradis*.

It was in August that Vane became aware of the change in her. She had said nothing to him of her troubles, but when their hands touched across the table of the big room in which they met, her hands had a waxy whiteness, while his were veritable brown paws. It was this contrast in the colour of their hands that made him look intently and anxiously at her face.

He said: "You are not well."

The adventure of seeing him had given her colour, but when the momentary colour passed she made him think of bleached foliage. Her eyes looked large and tired. Her mouth was a very pale mouth, and her facial curves had lost their fullness.

"It's the heat. They have moved me to another cell."

She saw that he was deeply concerned, and if anything could console her it was this assurance that he cared. She reacted to it during those few precious minutes. Her face seemed to fill out, and her eyes to regain their lustre.

"Oh, it's only just temporary. I don't feel the heat so much in the new cell. Isn't it the same at *St. Trophime*?"

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It wasn't the same, and he knew it. There was no dust at Le Paradis, no confinement, no white glare, and even at noon you could find green glooms and a sense of air moving under the trees.

"I wish to God I had you out of this!"

She tapped with her fingers on the back of one of his very brown hands.

"Dear—. It won't be very long now. I have got through nearly eighteen weeks. I've made a calendar, and each night I scratch off a day. It won't be very long."

He believed that which he wished to believe, for Le Paradis and Elsie were the counterparts of his new world, and he could not postulate Le Paradis without inferring Elsie. He was full of ideas for the winter—roses from Lyons, bulbs from Holland; he was planning to sink a water cistern or open pool just below the terrace, and perhaps Le Paradis would possess a fountain. Through Mr. Smith he had engaged a gardener, one Antonio, an Italian and good Italian, who speedily became "Tony."

Yes, obviously his object should be to keep Elsie interested, to pour into that cloistered dullness live details of their new world, and to help her to combat the ennui and the heat. He brought her bunches of grapes from the vineyard. They were not so large as they should be, for the vines had not been pruned, but he was going to make wine. He had arranged for a local vine-grower to come and show him how to deal with the fruit at vintage time. He took her books each week, and patterns procured from the shops at Nice. He made a will in her favour. "My dear, if anything should happen to me, there will be nothing for you to worry about—financially." It was an English will, drawn for him by Stuart Blagden, and he was warned against keeping a copy of it in France—unless, of course, he contemplated becoming a naturalized Frenchman. He and Elsie were to be married at the English

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consulate, and Mr. Humphry Grylls had advised him as to the formalities, documentary and otherwise.

Death! It was nowhere on the horizon. It never occurred to him that anything could happen to Elsie, and he had never felt so sure of life. His face was set towards the increasing significance of the future. He thought of Elsie as a strong young woman, years younger than he was. In a few months the languor of that unnatural life would have passed like some wet and steaming summer. He would possess Elsie and be possessed by Elsie; they would give and they would take.

At night he would sit on the terrace and look at the stars and the lights of St. Pierre across the bay, and imagine all that was to be. He saw Elsie coming to Le Paradis, and standing at the iron gate and looking up through the cypresses at Le Paradis in the spring of the year, with all his bulbs in flower, and the world all green.

He thought of Elsie as comrade and woman. St. Trophime had preached the needs of the flesh, and he wanted Elsie the woman.

Exquisite, dear intimacies.

They would wake together in the morning and see the shutters ribbed with gold.

III

In December, that which was fashionable in Nice and Cannes and Monte Carlo spread to the La Maison Masquée. It began in the canteen, diffused itself through the chapel, and became *à la mode* in almost every cell. The governor was in bed for a week; all the wardresses suffered in turn; the infirmary was full of cases of bronchitis and pneumonia.

The logical French had kept Elsie in that northern cell, and though it was heated, it received no sunlight, and quite early in

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December she became in the fashion. She too had influenza.

After two days in her cell they transferred her to the infirmary. She had what the prison doctor called a slight bronchial catarrh, and Vane, allowed to visit her there, had his alarm allayed by her pretty colour. There seemed to be more blood in her lips and skin. He had brought her flowers and fruit.

"I am going to stay in Nice until I hear you are all right."

She said that he was taking the affair far too seriously.

"You mustn't stay in Nice. They won't let you see me again till next week, and by then I shall be quite fit."

"I am going to stay and look at the furniture shops."

"That means a week in an hotel. Do go back to Le Paradis."

He took a bunch of grapes out of one of the bags he had brought with him, and held it up for her to see.

"Le Paradis won't run away, and there is nothing sour about these."

He was aware of her turning her head towards the bed on her right. Its occupant was a woman with a vast red face, and below her pendulous chin hung the bulge of a goitre. The woman had slits of eyes—very evil eyes—and she was watching them.

Elsie made a beckoning movement with two fingers of a hand, and Vane understood that she had something secret to say to him. He bent his head.

"Hal—the patient next me."

"Yes?"

"I would like her to have some of the fruit."

He glanced from Elsie's face at the sensual and soiled ugliness of that other face.

"Of course—if you—"

"Yes, do."

He had brought two bags of fruit with him, and he rose and,

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going to the other bed, presented one of the bags to the woman.

"Madame will accept the fruit from us?"

Her eyes, sunk between bladders of fat, were two crevices. She seemed to hesitate, and there was hostility in her hesitation, and then she put out a hand and grabbed the bag.

"*Merci, monsieur.*"

She began to eat the fruit, making a noise like an animal, and Vane returned to the chair beside Elsie's bed, realizing that in a prison infirmary one might be very much at the mercy of one's neighbours.

When Vane had gone, the woman rolled on her side and, rising on one elbow, spat a grape-skin on to Elsie's bed.

"That's for luck, you Anglaise. Clean sheets and no brats to bother you. Yes, that's your luck. You've never sold stinking fish in Marseilles."

Within a week Elsie was back in her cell, and not sorry to be there, largely because she was not troubled by the nearness of that grossly proletarian neighbour. Her temperature was normal, but the influenza had left her with a cough that somehow showed no inclination to disappear. She had been returned to the ordinary prison routine, and since half the congregation in the chapel appeared to be subject to spasms of coughing, she could not consider herself singular. Nor did she. She sat and sewed. She walked round and round the courtyard when the prisoners exercised, and she found that the cold air made her cough. That too was understandable, but she seemed more sensitive to the cold, for those December days happened to be grey, and she had the languor of convalescence upon her.

She thought: "Of course I shall be all right in a week or two. Only four months now. It will be spring when I go to Le Paradis."

When she and Vane met in the large room, and their hands

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touched across the table, she would have forgotten that catch in her chest had it not insisted suddenly upon self-expression. She tried to suppress it, and couldn't. She felt her lover's hands grasping hers as though he reacted to the spasm.

"I say—you are still coughing!"

"Yes, just a little."

She was a little confused by the searching intentness of his gaze.

"You shouldn't be."

"Oh, half the prison is coughing."

"Has the doctor seen you again?"

"No. I don't suppose they think it is necessary."

He would not let her hands go, and when she could not restrain the cough, something vital in Vane was shaken by it. Almost, he looked frightened.

"Get the doctor to see you."

"I'll ask one of the wardresses."

"Promise. Don't play about with yourself. You are much too precious."

She pressed his hands.

"Am I?"

"Almost too much so for my peace of mind."

She smiled at him.

"My dear, there's nothing to worry about. Only four more months. Sometimes I can hardly believe—"

"That it's true?"

"Yes."

"It is true."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



ELSIE's cough did not disappear. A dry and almost secret little spasm, lasting only a few seconds, and causing her neither pain nor distress, it was so quiet and unobtrusive that it seemed little more than a clearing of the throat, a discord so trivial that it might pass unnoticed. But she was noticing other things about herself—languor, loss of appetite, a feeling of slight breathlessness when she had to climb the stairs after exercise or a visit to the canteen. She was not worried about herself, for she supposed that other women who had suffered from influenza were feeling much as she did, and the prison still coughed, and for the most part with more aggressiveness than she could command. The doctor had examined her; that is to say, he had looked at her tongue and felt her pulse, and had advised her to buy herself eggs and milk, but the prison milk was of a thin and watery blueness, and the eggs could not be called fresh. He ordered her a tonic.

"Il fait que vous mangex—mangex."

He had the absent and digestive air of a Frenchman who was contemplating the coming *déjeuner* and a subsequent *nettoie-ment* with a *cure-dent*.

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Vane saw her twice, and each visit left him with the impression that she was looking much better. She had more colour, and brighter eyes, and she did not cough during those brief reunions. He was very full of Le Paradis and the winter work in the garden. He told her that he had planted thousands of bulbs—narcissi of all kinds, hyacinths, muscari, anemones, and a few tulips in sheltered corners, for Antonio had warned him that tulips and the mistral were not *sympatica*. The wind flattened them or snapped off the coloured chalices.

He was still very brown, and somehow boyish, just as though life had regained all its sense of adventure.

"The chauffage is a great success. And it doesn't make the place too stuffy."

He could assure her that the new bath was equally successful. It was of the very latest design, half sunk in the floor and boxed in with pale blue and white tiles. "Almost Moorish, you know." Also that human mechanism, Marie, was all that Le Paradis could desire. She was fair and florid, and quite toothless, though her age could not be more than five-and-forty, and she appeared to wear about six petticoats, and if she had a temper it was as well padded as her person.

There had been a few rats in the outbuildings, but Marie's two cats had mopped them up.

Also he had decanted and bottled litres and litres of red wine, and binned it in the cellar to mature.

"Our first vintage, my dear."

At Christmas he brought her a present that was overdue.

"Perfectly fatuous of me! I woke up the other night and realized that I hadn't bought you a ring. They'll change it if it doesn't fit."

He slipped it on her finger, a hoop of diamonds and sapphires in an old French setting, and it fitted her finger exactly.

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"How's it feel?"

She looked just as thousands of other women have looked on such occasions—a little serious and shy and self-conscious, for some shreds of sentiment have survived Freud and a pathological psychology.

"It's perfectly lovely, Hal—but I—I wish you would keep it for me."

"Afraid of losing it?"

She hesitated, turning the ring round and round on her finger.

"We can be rather elemental here, and at the canteen—if one is seen wearing— Yes, some of the women—I have seen fights."

He took the ring back.

"Then I'll keep it for you. I understand. Thank God, I shall have you out of this in three months."

He returned to *Le Paradis* and the friendliness of *St. Trophime*, for though the "Bazaar" was inconveniently out of bounds, *St. Trophime* and *Vane* were learning to appreciate each other. He liked its funny little shops and the adventure of shopping in them, its thriftiness and polite attention to ten-centime pieces, its sun-bathing days and its genial loafers. Even the blue tables and the gaudy façade of the *Café de Paris* suggested the bouquet of old red wine. *St. Trophime* was tolerant and human and conversational, and those winter days were like blue silk. Early in the morning he heard the bells of *St. Pierre* sounding across the water, and presently his shutters would be gilded by the rising sun. Even the mistral seemed to be in a merciful mood, and its white whip fell gently upon the shoulders of the sea.

He would get up and open the shutters, and even if the day happened to be grey it was full of the promise of work. He and *Antonio* were busy giving the vines their winter food. It came from *Marseilles* in railway trucks, and *Antonio*—being devout

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Italian—would marvel aloud at the miracle.

"Dirt, leaves, grapes, red wine! God is a wonderful fellow."

Vane, straightening his back after twenty minutes' work with a spade, would look at his trees and the sea, and feel that the world was good.

II

But with Elsie the subjective and the objective were not in harmony. She might sit and sew, and see upon the white wall of her cell a picture of *Le Paradis*, a white house with green shutters that opened on the sea. Each time that she cut a thread she might feel that she was snipping off conceptions of space and time, that she was so many minutes or kilometres nearer to her destiny. Meanwhile her cough persisted, and her vague feeling of *malaise* increased. It grew more marked towards the evening, so much so that she suffered from a strange sense of mental confusion. Things became a little blurred. She would feel hot and she would feel cold. Her head ached; her eyes were so tired that she would soak a handkerchief in cold water and bathe them.

One evening, coming back from the canteen, she was attacked by a sudden giddiness as she entered her cell. Her legs seemed to melt like wax. She sat down hurriedly upon the bed, and dropped her purchases on it, and a wardress, passing the open door, saw the drooping figure.

The woman had been a good friend to Elsie, for the English girl gave no trouble and was *douce*.

"What is the matter with you, my dear?"

"I don't know, Celestine. I think I have a temperature."

For the last month they had called each other by their Christian names. Celestine walked into the cell, and grasping one of Elsie's hands, found it hot and moist.

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"*Absolument*—I should say so! I have a thermometer in my cubicle. I will go and get it. Lie down, my dear. I'll put these things away for you."

She went for the thermometer, and returning, slipped the bulb under Elsie's tongue.

"You've had a relapse, I expect. No. 63 had to go back to the infirmary yesterday."

A glance at the stem of the thermometer caused Celestine to make a little grimace. Elsie's temperature was 102.3 Fahrenheit, and Celestine went to report to the Chief Institutrice. The prison doctor was not available that evening, for he was attending a wedding, and French weddings are like a visit to Paris—affairs of much refreshment and a final dance, and yet more refreshment. Celestine gave Elsie ten grains of aspirin, and Elsie had strange dreams.

The doctor appeared in the morning. He was short-sighted and wore pince-nez, and the wedding was still an undigested experience, and as he peered at the little column of mercury in the thermometer his crooked pince-nez made him seem even more ineffectual. His eyebrows bristled, but there was no attack in their bushy curves. His mood was perfunctory.

A relapse! Yes, she had a little fever, and she watched him put the thermometer away in its case. She gathered that he was not inspired to explore the affair any further.

She said: "Doctor, I think it is my chest."

He stared at her, raising those hairy eyebrows, as though the suggestion was a little impertinent.

"Indeed!"

"I feel that there is something in my chest."

He sat down on the hard chair and produced a stethoscope, and with flustered fingers she unbuttoned her nightdress, but the

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doctor was a formalist. With a patient's chest exposed, etiquette required a wardress to be present, and he potted out on his short, stout legs, and called Celestine in. Elsie lay very still, watching his face while he examined her. He had a little tuft of black bristles on one side of his chin where the razor had missed its mark. His eyes blinked behind the high-powered lenses as though the wedding and a late night and sweet champagne had left them a little hot and guilty.

"Breathe deeply."

She did so. She noticed that he kept moving the mouthpiece of the apparatus from place to place, but that it tended to concentrate its attention upon an area of skin just below her right collarbone. He listened intently. He appeared puzzled.

"Cough—and then draw a deep breath."

She obeyed him.

"Again."

His eyelids blinked. He sat back in the chair, folded up the stethoscope, produced a handkerchief and blew his nose.

"Yes, mademoiselle is a little *enrhume*. I will send her to the infirmary."

He got up and walked out of the cell without another look at her, and his fat back disappearing through the doorway made her feel that whatever the condition might be, he regarded it as a matter of no importance. She buttoned up her nightdress, and looked at Celestine.

"It cannot be anything serious."

Celestine's lips shaped themselves as though to utter a particular word, an epithet, but she did not utter it, for before patients it was not policy to refer to a member of a learned profession as a pig.

Elsie was removed to the infirmary, and perhaps because of her *malaise* she had a most strange feeling that it was not Elsie Sum-

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merhays who was put to bed in that big, bald room. She was someone else, or a blurred and illegible edition of herself. She was hot and she was cold, and the air seemed to steam and quiver as on a very hot day in summer. And suddenly she was conscious of feeling frightened. She became the victim of a premonition. She would never see Le Paradis. She was going to die.

III

It was Celestine who, at Elsie's request, wrote to Vane.

MONSIEUR,

Mademoiselle Summerhays wishes me to write to you. She is ill again, and in the infirmary. I think Monsieur should come at once.

Vane was in his working clothes and going out to join Antonio in the vineyard when Marie brought him that letter. The handwriting on the envelope puzzled him, though the Nice postmark was legible, but when he had read those simple sentences he was conscious of a kind of inward silence. For the moment he did not react to the reality, or realize the significance it might have for him. He might have been listening to a small voice speaking in the distance, and the words were both indistinct and strange.

He was smoking a pipe. He put the pipe down on the window-seat of one of the *salon* windows, and forgot it, and that evening Marie found it there. He re-read the letter, folded it up, stood for a moment looking out of the window at the early sunlight shining through the cypresses, and then went out into the hall and called to Marie.

"Marie."

She came from the kitchen.

"Monsieur?"

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"I am going to Nice at once. I may be away for a day or two. Can you manage?"

"Yes, monsieur."

He went up the stairs to take off those working clothes, and both the house and Marie seemed to listen to his slow, deliberate footsteps.

Vane reached Nice in the afternoon. It was not a visiting day at La Maison Masquée, and he found that it would be necessary for him to procure a special permit, and while he was waiting for the permission to arrive they kept him in a little, unheated *salle-d'attente*. He was both uncomfortably cold and increasingly worried. He walked up and down and round the room. He kept looking at his watch. The formalities were like those irritating cordons that the police draw across streets on state occasions, and he was in a hurry to get through and explore his crisis. He remained there for more than an hour, trying to convince himself that if Elsie was dangerously ill the authorities would have notified him officially.

But why should the official mind take cognizance of an obscure Englishman living a hundred odd miles away at St. Trophime? A prison was neither a hospital nor a nursing-home. He kept looking at his watch.

Then some minor official came into the room, a little, gusty, fat fellow who was very much in a hurry.

"Monsieur has permission to visit No. 65."

He hustled Vane out into the corridor, and handed him over to a wardress who looked at Vane as though he was some impersonal fragment of a man. He understood that he was to follow her. One of her shoes squeaked, and the leather complained up two flights of stone stairs.

The infirmary was full, and it belonged to that order of public apartment which in France can be both bright and stuffy. Some-

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one was coughing, and as Vane paused in the doorway and looked at the rows of beds, the wardress gave him a curt push.

"Over there, the bed in the corner."

As he followed the broad gangway between the beds with the eyes of the whole ward observing him, he became aware of Elsie as a pair of strangely large dark eyes. Almost, he got the impression that she did not recognize him. Those eyes of hers expressed a blurred and inarticulate distress. He came to the foot of her bed, and suddenly her eyes lit up.

"Oh, Hal—!"

He moved to the side of the bed. He took one of her hands. It was very hot. It seemed to him that she was breathing rather rapidly; a patch of colour showed on either cheek. Her voice lacked volume; it was distinct, but rather like a whisper.

"I'm so glad you've come."

There was a chair by the bed, and he sat down. He smiled at her. He was conscious of sudden fear, and of the urge to dissemble that fear. It seemed to him that her eyes looked to him for help.

"I'm so glad you've come. I'm afraid it's my chest."

Her whispering voice ended in a cough, and as he sat holding her hand the foundations of his recreated world were shaken by that little cough of hers.

"Does it hurt you?"

"No, it doesn't hurt me."

But he was hurt by it, and more distressed by her breathlessness than she was, for his breathlessness was an emotional spasm, a pang of the imagination. As he was to say to Grylls later: "That cough of hers rends me." He was on the edge of panic, and his fear rushed into the blind alleys of a premonition and found itself lost and distracted. Something wrong with her chest! But what was he afraid of? His own fear?

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He made himself smile at her.

"Has the doctor seen you?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

Again she was coughing, and he realized that talking made her cough. She looked distressed, and her distress added yet another wound to his fear.

"You mustn't talk, dear. Just lie still."

He patted her hand.

"I'm going to stay in Nice. Yes—I'll stay here till you are better. Are they doing everything for you?"

She held his hand.

"Yes. But I feel I can't breathe here, Hal. It's so—so stuffy."

"Stuffy?"

"Yes, there doesn't seem to be any air."

He looked at the windows. He felt that he wanted to break those windows to let air in to her, or to take her away from this place, and in realizing his helplessness he, too, felt in prison. She was smothering, and he couldn't get her out. Both of them were involved in some stupid and stifling fatality, shipwreck, submergence.

He made himself smile at her.

"I'll have to do something about it. Yes, there must be something. Is there anything you fancy?"

"Fancy?"

"Fruit—or—"

Again she coughed, and he felt his fear rising and rendering him voiceless. He just sat and held her hand.

They came to tell him that it was time for him to go, and as he rose and stood beside the bed he was aware of her eyes looking up at him with the same expression of bewilderment that had char-

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acterized her in the Pym days. She, too, was afraid of some nameless thing, the fog of a muddled destiny. He understood that she wanted to speak to him, and he bent over her.

"Oh, Hal, try to get me out of this place."

He found himself in the corridor with the wardress, and his fear had taken to itself an edge of anger.

"I want to see the doctor."

Her sallow and impassive face seemed to hang there like a bladder of lard. He gathered that she did not understand him, and suddenly his French fell to pieces like a pack of cards. He fumbled for the words like a man trying to pull threads out of a tangled skein.

"Le médecin—"

She stared at him, and her eyes were like the eyes of a cow.

"What does monsieur say?"

He could have smacked her stolid, stupid face. He broke into English.

"I want to see the prison doctor. I want to know what's the matter. I want something done."

"I do not understand English. Monsieur had better apply at the bureau."

But she did understand that in his impatience he was not feeling polite to her, and she went about her business, turning recalcitrant shoulders. He found himself descending the stone stairs, and they too were unsympathetic. He felt both confused and exasperated. Something seemed to burn and throb at the back of his head. Oh, damn these people! He reached the lower corridor, and seeing a door ajar he pushed it open. The same little stout and florid official was seated at a desk, and Vane addressed him in fumbling French.

"Monsieur, I wish to see the prison doctor."

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The minor official was stubbornly occupied with departmental affairs. He glanced at Vane, and with an air of busy truculence went on with the sorting of documents.

"It is not my department, monsieur."

Vane repeated the challenge.

"I want to see the doctor."

The Frenchman did not raise his eyes.

"The doctor is not in attendance. Monsieur had better call again to-morrow."

"But—monsieur—"

"To-morrow."


Vane's exasperation blazed. His impulse was to take this little wad of officialdom by the neck and shake it. He was trembling. He watched the two thick-fingered hands sorting papers, and suddenly his anger changed to fear. This place was like a mass of jelly in which your hopes and your dreads got themselves embedded; it was a glutinous surface to which you adhered like a fly. He turned and fled. He found himself out in the street and walking furiously. But whither?

This damned conglomeration of buildings that was Nice! People, people—to whom he could not speak! Who the devil cared?

Almost he collided with a lamp standard, and in avoiding it recovered his emotional poise.

He remembered Mr. Humphry Grylls.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



SOCIETY, having laid out its streets and its sewage system, and built a "bourse" and trained a police force to protect the decencies of property, assigns to its functionaries the privilege of suppressing any undesirable rodents who may emerge from the social sewers. Society, having tabulated its rules and regulations, finds in the exceptional mere obstruction. The abnormal child is likely to be regarded as a nuisance, and society is right. Only those exceptions that can transcend society have the justification of survival.

Even Mr. Grylls was a formalist, while making occasional excursions into the original. He had an active mistrust of the "Social Slop" of raucous reform. It was he who was responsible for the particular saying, "Believe me, without property there are no decencies. The communist is a rat who has escaped from the sewer."

But the individual in Mr. Grylls understood the exasperated individualist in Vane. Sewers and prisons may be the indispensable products of civilization, and if the rat and the blowfly are biological entities, society must prepare its traps and its fly-papers. He said, "I'll see what I can do."

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His attempts were to some purpose. He rang up various people in authority, and also an English doctor who was bilingual, and whose personality transcended the cynicism of Nice.

"I'll try and get Stafford to see her. He has a conscience."

The authorities were persuadable. After all there was no logical reason why some latitude should not be allowed in such a case, especially so, as the affair was not going to cost France a single centime. An Englishman was paying. Dr. Stafford, though he was the busiest physician between Mentone and Cannes, yet found time to visit *Le Maison Masquée* and to examine Elsie.

He reported to Grylls by phone.

"Apical pneumonia. Yes, she's rather bad. I wish I could get her out of this place, but I suppose that's impossible. I'll see her again to-morrow."

Grylls had Vane sitting on his doorstep, or rather—in one of his arm-chairs, and he passed him Dr. Stafford's message. Vane was smoking a pipe; he had been smoking furiously and continuously all that evening.

"Wouldn't it be possible to get her out?"

Mr. Grylls did not say that the thing was impossible, but he did explain to Vane that if a mechanical process has to be arrested or reversed a number of levers may have to be pulled. Monsieur So and So This has to notify Monsieur So and So That. Dossiers pass and repass. The final authority might be compared to a spider ensconced in the centre of an immense web. It was not easy to shake a fly out of the web.

"But I'll try it."

"At once?"

"Obviously. I happen to know the procedure. We have to get a petition to the spider and produce him various titbits of information. I think that Stafford can help us more than anybody."

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"You mean—if he will give a certificate?"

"Just so. Miss Summerhays has served nearly nine months of her sentence. It isn't logical to assume that she should be cheated of life—because— Oh, well, you know what I mean. The trouble is that the logical mind can be so damned dilatory. I'll get the process started at once."

He was aware of Vane sitting rigidly on the edge of a chair and staring at a frayed patch in the carpet.

"Of course—everything may be over before— Yes, that's the tragedy of this sort of muddle."

Mr. Grylls rubbed his black beard.

"That's always the tragedy when we have to make things out of cast-iron. When you build you have to consider statics. That's why youth is always boiling over and denouncing cast-iron kettles."

Vane passed seven execrable days.

He was back in the world of hotels, and hotel life exaggerated the restlessness of that period of suspense. After the spacious tranquillity of *Le Paradis* he felt like a little animal in a box let out for food and exercise. He was one among scores of other small creatures who popped in and out of bolt-holes. While the flame of his fate flickered there was nothing for him to do but walk and walk, and if any town came to associate itself with his private conception of Hell, that town was Nice.

Le Paradis seemed so very far away. The vision of it was so green and tantalizing that there were moments when he felt that he had dreamed *Le Paradis*, and reawaked to reality in an hotel bedroom.

The news about Elsie was grave.

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He was so very helpless.

He could not sleep.

The mistral blew, and the whole world was dust and disorder.

During those days when callous circumstance seemed to be cheating him at every corner he was quite sure that he was a most infernal nuisance to Mr. Humphry Grylls, but that Mr. Grylls embraced his patience like a benign black bear clasping a skepful of honey. He seemed to be always ringing Mr. Grylls's bell or using the consular telephone.

He would stand and protest to Mr. Grylls.

"If only I could get her out of that place."

Mr. Grylls was very gentle with him.

"There's probably some purpose at the back of everything. We're reverting to a belief in prayer."

"If I could get her to Le Paradis."

During that week he was not allowed to see Elsie, for her condition was too critical, but on the ninth day the mistral ceased to rave, and Dr. Stafford had words of comfort for him.

"I think the worst's over. I think she will pull through."

Strange, sweet words, so beautiful that they seemed tinged with unreality, and in the stillness of a moonlit evening he went down to the sea and standing close to its soft surge, turned those words over as though they sparkled in his hands.

Were they true? Was the glitter of them transient?

III

On the twelfth day he was allowed to see Elsie.

He found her as vivid as those words, lying very white and still, and looking all eyes. There was a screen round the bed, and as he slipped in past it he was conscious of breathlessness. His very move-

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ments were gradual and supremely cautious as though he carried a cup of wine no drop of which must be spilled. He sat down on the edge of a chair. He looked at her and marvelled, for it seemed to him that she had a beauty that was not of this world.

She smiled at him; she moved a hand. She was alive to his poor, frightened face. She loved it.

"Oh, Hal."

The smile he gave her in return was a little, anguished contraction of the muscles.

"My dear, you've scared the life out of me."

He put a hand over hers and gazed at her.

"It doesn't worry you, does it?"

"What, Hal?"

"My looking at you like this. No, you mustn't talk."

Her lips moved. She seemed to discover some profound and exquisite piece of humour in that question of his.

"How could it?"

He had a feeling that deep down in the soul of Elsie mysterious laughter sounded.

"My dear, I've been so frightened. But not now."

Her fingers closed on his.

"Don't worry. When I'm at Le Paradis, Hal, I shall be all right. Don't worry."

IV

But suspense was still to torment him, for though Elsie left her bed in the infirmary, and returned to her cell, all was not well with her. Certainly the routine was relaxed in her favour, and the outside world was permitted to send her butter and eggs and little delicacies, but her cough persisted.

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It troubled Dr. Stafford as a physician, for in the lung tissue he suspected a little patch of inflammation that had not resolved itself. He suspected the presence of a particular bacillus, the bacillus of tubercle.

"Are you spitting up anything?"

"Just a little, the first thing in the morning."

"I want you to save me a specimen."

The bacteriologist's examination was negative so far as tubercle was concerned, but Dr. Stafford was bound to say, "I don't like that cough of hers. She wants a change."

To Vane her cough brought a catch in his own breathing, a painful contraction of the heart. The foundations of his self were shaken by that small discord. He knew, or he felt that he knew just what Elsie needed, sun, air, Le Paradis, the freedom of sky and sea.

He protested, both to Mr. Grylls and the doctor.

"If I can only get her to Le Paradis I feel that she will be all right. That damned place is killing her."

In Dr. Stafford's eyes he seemed to read compassionate acquiescence. The official world needed humanizing. So, there were moments in Vane's day—and in his nights—when he felt himself to be not quite sane. He understood that old phrase—"the fever of suspense," and being helpless he cursed, as men curse in secret.

"Oh, damn society! Why can't they let her out? She's just smothering in that infernal prison."

He was seen on Mr. Grylls's doorstep every morning.

"Any news?"

"Not yet."

Vane's lips might be silent, but in his eyes the whole spirit of man protested.

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V

It was on the last day of January that the news came. Vane was rung up at his hotel, and when he closed the door of the telephone-box he felt that he had shut himself in with the live body of his fear.

"Hallo."

"Is that you, Vane?"

"Yes."

"The official word has just come through. Yes, from Paris. She is to be released at once."

Vane gulped down something that was inarticulate.

"Thank God. That means—?"

"To-morrow."

"Then, we can be married here?"

"Yes."

"Have you told her?"

"No. I thought you'd like to tell her. They will let you see her to-night, if you like. Good business, what?"

Vane rested his forehead against the wall of the telephone-box.

"Say, Grylls, I feel a bit funny. I think I'll go and have a whisky."

"Have a double whisky."

And Mr. Grylls rang off.

VI

On that February morning when Vane guided the blue Renault out of the garage of the Hotel des Palmiers and drove round to the front of the hotel to pick up his wife, the day was the day of his dreams. There had been a slight frost in the night, but now—at eleven o'clock in the morning—the day had warmed itself. It

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had the exquisite texture of some beautiful fabric. There were wood fires on the hills where peasants were clearing and burning patches of *maquis*, and across the bay St. Pierre was a goblin town wreathed in pale blue smoke. No wind blew, and the sea was very still.

Vane tucked his wife into the car. She was wearing a fur coat that he had bought for her at Nice.

"It's our lucky day."

"Is it always like this, Hal, here?"

"Oh, not quite always."

She was as alive as the morning, and as he drove slowly through the narrow streets of St. Trophime she looked happily at all that St. Trophime had to show her.

"Is that the market, Hal?"

"Yes. Marie comes here every day."

"I suppose I can do the marketing sometimes?"

"I suppose so."

He took the Renault along the road between the white houses and the *plage*, past the casino and the gaudy new villas with their confectionery faces, and he was aware of her glancing somewhat questioningly at those villas.

"It's all right. We are not like that."

They crossed the railway track, and skirting some gardens and a pine wood came to the lane leading up to Le Paradis, and Vane stopped the car below the iron gates in the high stone wall. He got out and opened the door for his wife.

"Here we are."

On such miraculous occasions man does not transcend the obvious, but Vane was very conscious of Elsie standing beside him and looking through the blue burr of the painted iron-work. The cypresses framed a white segment of the old house, the terrace

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steps and two bays of the balustrade. It was a moment of suspense for him. Surely she would see the place as he saw it, in all its lovable and sunny secrecy?

She spoke, "Oh, Hal, it's perfect."

"Like it?"

"Do we really go through this gate and up between the cypresses?"

"We do."

"I used to sit and imagine things—but not like this."

He opened the iron gate and as she passed through it he heard her cough. The small sound troubled him. Was it an omen? And he glanced at her secretly and anxiously, and gathered that she was not conscious of having coughed. She was caressing the trunk of one of the trees.

He said: "Of course—it's still winter here, but some of the anemones are out, and the narcissi are beginning."

She slipped a hand under his arm.

"And it's all ours. Let me stop here a moment."

"Not tired?"

"Oh, no. Isn't it beautifully placed—the house, I mean. It might have grown up with the trees."

They passed up between the cypresses to the grassy hollow below the terrace where Vane had sunk his new water-cistern and blessed it with a fountain. Pale blue *Iris Stilosa* were flowering in the grass, and the sky was reflected in the water.

He smiled down at her,

"You can see yourself in it."

So she could.

At the top of the terrace steps he heard her cough again, and the sound seemed strange to him in the sunlight. It added a poignancy to the beauty of the morning. It was like an edge of

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shadow still chilling him with suspense. His arm slipped round her as though to draw her away from that shadow.

"You are going to get quite well here."

She was looking at the green shutters of the house, and in her eyes there was no shadow of fear.

"Of course. You're not worrying, Hal?"

He assured her that he was not worrying.

VII

During the first two months at Le Paradis Vane listened for the sound of his wife's cough. Sometimes he heard it in the morning, but it grew less and less frequent, a mere clearing of the throat, and in April he realized that she had ceased to cough. The trees were in green leaf, and the vines sprouting, and the *maquis* foaming with flower. The little shadowy edge of his suspense withdrew itself and disappeared.

One evening she said to him:

"Hal, you've never yet turned on the fountain."

He hadn't.

"No. As a matter of fact—I had a feeling, a superstition about it. Like to try it?"

They had brought their chairs out to the terrace to watch the setting sun light up St. Pierre across the bay, and removing a small ringed stone in the pavement he showed her the cock that closed the feed-pipe.

"It's rather like christening a ship. It's your business to do it."

"Which way do I turn the tap?"

"To the left."

The jet of water rose into the air and pluming itself in the sunlight made a soft plashing as it fell down into the cistern, and

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Vane, with a little secret smile, watched it and listened.

"That will be rather a pleasant sound when the weather gets hot."

He became aware of the serious and thoughtful face of his wife.

"Shan't we be wasting a lot of water, Hal?"

"Well, we can limit our baths!"

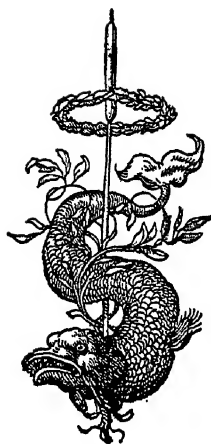
"You're teasing! Be serious."

And then her eyes lit up.

"You think we have been sufficiently serious?"

"Well, haven't we? We have been two black sheep."

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET



DEVICE OF
ROBERT GRANJON

This book is set in Granjon, a type named in compliment to ROBERT GRANJON, but neither a copy of a classic face nor an entirely original creation. George W. Jones drew the basic design for this type from classic sources, but deviated from his model to profit by the intervening centuries of experience and progress. This type is based primarily upon the type used by Claude Garamond (1510-61) in his beautiful French books, and more closely resembles Garamond's own than do any of the various modern types that bear his name.

Of Robert Granjon nothing is known before 1545, except that he had begun his career as type-cutter in 1523. The boldest and most original designer of his time, he was one of the first to practise the trade of type-founder apart from that of printer. Between 1549 and 1551 he printed a number of books in Paris, also continuing as type-cutter. By 1557 he was settled in Lyons and had married Antoinette Salamon, whose father, Bernard, was an artist associated with Jean de Tournes. Between 1557 and 1562 Granjon printed about twenty books in types designed by himself, following, after the fashion of the day, the cursive handwriting of the time. These types, usually known as "*caractères de civilité*," he himself called "*lettres français*," as especially appropriate to his own country. He was granted a monopoly of these types for ten years, but they were soon copied. Granjon appears to have lived in Antwerp for a time, but was at Lyons in 1575 and 1577, and for the next decade at Rome, working for the Vatican and Medici presses, his work consisting largely in cutting exotic types. Towards the end of his life he may have returned to live in Paris, where he died in 1590.

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